The Demon's Song

By: MontyMarten

As the Circum-Pacific War breaks out, Kathryn Hamilton finds herself burdened with responsibility and a legacy she never wanted. Torn between duty and expectations, she fights to protect her homeland and her allies as the ghosts of a fallen nation seek reckoning. Hailed as both heroes and demons, four wings must light the path to peace with an unquenchable blaze.

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Prologue

Prologue

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Sand Island Air Force Base, Ceres Ocean.

***September 22nd, 2010* .**

0800hrs.

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The tropical environment of the Sand Island Air Base proved to be a drastic but welcomed change from the autumn chill back at the mainland states. Albert Genette found himself taking a deep breath the second he stepped foot off the transport plane that had carried him to the island. Although he knew himself well enough to know the heat and humidity would become his worst enemy in just a matter of hours, for now it felt like a pleasant summer day.

Mixed in with the scent of fuel was the familiar smell of the ocean. Unlike the beaches in and around Oured, the sea smelled almost sweet. The absence of the smell of sunscreen and various other products and picnic food and barbeque probably contributed to that, though it did have the aforementioned fuel smell to contend with. Otherwise it was an almost ideal vacation spot. Keyword ' *almost* '.

In spite of the scenery and location, it was still a military facility. Something Genette was reminded of as soon as his eyes adjusted to the bright, early morning sunlight and he found himself greeted by an officer in an Osean Air Defense Force dress uniform. The soldier was on the taller side, with sharp features and green eyes that watched him like a hawk, dirty blond hair visible from underneath the cap he wore. As Genette approached him he offered a small smile in greeting, almost amiable if not for the cold and intimidating presence he had. The insignia on his shoulder easily identified him as a captain.

"You're the reporter, Albert Genette, I presume?" His voice was smooth, the pitch and tone remaining mostly constant but not flat. It lifted at the end, making the question seem more pleasant than official. Clearly he had experience dealing with the general public.

"Yes, sir, that's me," Genette said with a smile of his own, having learned from the years he'd been working closely with the military that being as respectful as possible was the best way to stay in their good graces. The same could easily be said about anyone regardless of profession, but in a setting where he was essentially stepping into another world it was best to play by their rules. "It's an honor to be here. I'm looking forward to working with you all."

"Well, you're certainly energetic. Passionate about your work, then, I take it?" The question was rhetorical, but Genette responded with a quick nod nevertheless. He went on to introduce himself. "I'm Captain Allen Hamilton. The adjutant base commander here and a former pilot myself. Pleasure to meet you."

Hamilton held out his hand, which Genette quickly grabbed, looking him in the eye as he gave his hand a firm shake. He couldn't help but be a little excited about the assignment, but he did his best to keep his excitement under control. "The pleasure's all mine. I have to say, when I hadn't heard anything about my request in a while I was worried the air force had rejected it."

"Ah, yes, I apologize for how last minute everything was. We've had a large group of pilots transferred here from Heierlark Air Force Base, so business around here has been more hectic than usual," Hamilton said, seeming almost a bit annoyed as he added, "In addition to that, our base commander is a… *interesting* individual. He wasn't exactly keen on the idea, not until I convinced him it was good publicity for the OADF."

"I suppose I owe you, then. After hearing rumors about that squadron leader of yours, I've been dying to see for myself the kind of pilots stationed here," Genette said, and he wasn't just saying that just for the sake of flattery.

Over the course of his career, albeit one that was admittedly short compared to other journalists, he'd worked closely with all branches

of the military. While the OADF wasn't lacking in skilled fighter pilots, having a beyond formidable force at their disposal, Genette had been looking for a special breed of fighter pilot. The likes of which had been dying out since the Belkan War fifteen years prior. While spending time with pilots stationed at bases around the capital, he came to learn of a veteran pilot that had taken to teaching over the last few years.

A squadron leader that made a profound impact on each of his pupils, taking on the most inexperienced pilots and in no time turning them into pilots with the makings of an ace. There'd been many supposed 'miracle aces' over the decades, and he'd heard only a small portion were capable of challenging them, but the fact they had the potential to rival those aces was in itself an impressive feat.

"Well, may as well get introductions out of the way then, while our best instructors are in one place? Among them are several other 'interesting individuals', I'll say that much," Hamilton said. He started to move to turn away, perhaps to lead Genette off for those introductions he mentioned, but he paused once he looked over the bags Genette had brought along. "Or…hmm, are you comfortable leaving your luggage in the hands of our men or would you prefer being shown to your quarters first?"

"I don't really have any valuables on me, save for my equipment and my computer, but I keep my camera on me at all times," Genette said, not about to pass up a chance to meet with their pilots just to go drop off luggage and inevitably head to the base commander's office to go over a few official forms he'd no doubt need. Most everything had been completed, but there were some things that needed to be gone over in person. He slid the bag containing all of his clothes and his laptop off his shoulder, setting it off to the side near some cargo that he'd traveled with. "The decision is yours, Captain, just lead the way."

"Alright, then, we'll worry about that later when we head over to HQ. Follow me. I'll show you to the hangars," Hamilton said, nodding to some nearby soldiers that Genette hadn't noticed. They were a part of the crew that had been waiting for the transport's arrival, and apparently had heard the entire conversation. Something told him most everyone had been informed of his expected arrival ahead of

time, as though they were preparing for some event. Hamilton continued, changing the subject as they began their walk. "In spite of how many pilots see their combat training completed here, the OADF usually chooses to ignore us until it suits them. What about our pilots could have possibly piqued your interest?"

"As it turns out, I've run across some pilots that used to be assigned to the squadron here," Genette said, looking all around at his surroundings to get a feel for the area. It was a perfect place for an airstrip, and the perfect setting for any photography or film. "They mentioned having learned from the best out here. Naturally with all the stories out there over the years about unique pilots, I couldn't pass up the opportunity. Call it intuition, if you will."

Hamilton nodded slowly, keeping his eyes fixed on their path as he led Genette along the aircraft ramp, apparently making for one of the open hangars at the far end of the stretch of pavement. "Hopefully we won't disappoint you, then. In spite of the difficulties I had convincing the base commander to accept the request from you and the OBC, you couldn't have picked a better time."

"I haven't been disappointed so far. This place is incredible just from looks alone." As he said that, Genette looked over towards the trees around the edge of the base fence, several yards away at least. Flocks of various seabirds flew overhead, only a few willing to land on the tarmac until the sound of a fighter jet roared overhead and startled them into the air, as though they would be safer there. They'd have better luck on the beach.

"Looks can be deceiving. Life around here is often rather boring," Hamilton said, his attention naturally drawn towards the source of the sound overhead. He gave a short chuckle. "We could use a change of pace around here. But if nothing else, our private airshows are always a sight to behold."

Genette could imagine so. His family, mainly his father, had always dragged him off to the nearest airshows. The OADF had a wide variety of aircraft and plenty of demo teams to show for it, so there were several over the course of a few months. When he was much younger the trips exhausted him, but with age he'd come to love it. There really wasn't anything like watching aerial stunts and being

able to feel the power of the aircraft down to your bones. It was exhilarating.

The two of them fell into silence after that for a few moments, neither having anything to say on the rest of their walk. Genette had half a mind to fish as much information out of Captain Hamilton as he could, but he held back. Hamilton wasn't the reason he'd come to this island, and seeing as he wasn't a pilot he probably wasn't expecting to be bombarded. He seemed more interested in keeping a low profile, jumping straight into business and not dwelling on any of his remarks about the base commander or the instructors. If there was any sort of story to be had there, it wasn't one Genette was interested in at the moment, though he did think to keep an eye on him during the stay.

Who knew? Maybe this place had some surprises in store for him after all.

They arrived at an open hangar further down from where the transport aircraft had parked, though not the farthest one down it was still a good ways away. Inside was a row of F-4Gs, if his memory served him correctly, both from seeing the aircraft up close as well as what he'd gone over to familiarize himself with the aircraft used here on Sand Island. All around were several men and women in standard flight suits, but he knew not all of them were pilots. Some of them served as Radar Intercept Officers, though it would take him some time before he worked out who was who.

Three men stood in front of the crowd of rookies, and off to the side were three other apparently senior officers. Two more men and a woman of roughly the same age all surveyed the crowd, looking between the instructors and the crowd, seemingly monitoring the lesson at first though occasionally they had their own input. Off to the side of the hangar was another older gentleman, his hair balding rather than graying, and while he apparently was listening to and occasionally observing them all, he looked to be a part of the maintenance crew rather than a pilot. The jumpsuit he wore was dark blue rather than the dull, dusty green the aircraft crew wore.

As they stepped inside, a few of the rookies noticed their arrival and gave them curious looks. One in particular caught Hamilton's eye, a

young woman with dark hair and the same green eyes that he had standing in the front row of soldiers. They seemed familiar with each other, as Hamilton gave her an almost stern glare that she didn't shrink away from, until the scrawny young man next to her leaned over and said something to her. The two broke their eye contact, and Genette was left wondering just how well they knew each other. Aside from the dark brown hair the woman had as opposed to Hamilton, they almost looked like they could have been siblings. It was the eyes, he figured. Sharp like a hawk or an eagle or some other bird of prey.

The instructors finally took notice of Hamilton, the one that had been speaking trailing off. He was tall, with graying black hair and brown eyes, a five o'clock shadow giving him a rough looking appearance. One look at Genette and he smirked, a playful glint in his eyes. "Captain Hamilton…how goes your new career as a tour guide?"

A few scattered chuckles sounded throughout the crowd, mostly from the older members of the crowd, and the mildly irritated look that Hamilton was quick to cover up told Genette this wasn't the first time he was the victim of their teasing. He cleared his throat. "Captain Bartlett. I hope I'm not interrupting anything. This is the reporter you were all told about, Mr. Albert Genette."

"You can just call me Genette," Genette said quickly, taking a few steps forward. He'd never really liked his first name all that much, keeping it reserved for family and close friends. In a professional setting his surname sounded better and in his experience most in the military would call him by it anyways. But with the way Hamilton had introduced him he wanted to be sure. "It's an honor to be working with you."

"Can't imagine why," Bartlett said with a chuckle, glancing at the other instructors. He stepped forward, holding out his hand to Genette. Just as he'd done with Hamilton, he gave him a quick but firm handshake as Bartlett added, "But anyways, good to meet you."

"If you're gonna be tagging along with us I trust you've been through high-g training ahead of time, correct?" one of the other instructors asked him in a gravelly voice, narrowing his eyes. He was shorter than Bartlett, with light hair and dull, sunken eyes. Older, probably

more experienced, but less welcoming. "The last thing we need is to throw you up in a jet with little to no experience. Anything happens to you and it's our asses that end up on the line."

Genette was aware everyone was staring at them, listening in on their conversation. He'd gone through the necessary training, having been eased into it, but that didn't mean he handled it as well as a fighter pilot might. However, he could keep up with most basic maneuvers. Provided they gave him fair warning before doing anything too wild he was sure he'd be fine. "Yes, sir, I've gone through all of the necessary courses. It's not my first time doing something like this, but I'll do my best not to become a liability."

"Didn't do your homework did you, Svenson?" The third instructor, not as young as Bartlett but not as old as Svenson, scoffed, shaking his head. Svenson's response was to give him a warning glare. "This guy's pretty hardcore. He's jumped out of helicopters with special forces teams during their training exercises before, and that's not even the most spectacular thing he's done."

"Bad enough we've got these kids to babysit…" Svenson grumbled under his breath.

"Alright, Baker, lay off him. I'd like him not to be in a bad mood when we're stuck in the air with him," the woman standing off to the side called out, the two men she was beside both chuckling. They didn't bother stifling their laughter. "Then again, guess it'd only be Roberts' problem, not ours."

"Alright, alright. Why don't both you assholes lay off him? Not his fault he doesn't know how to work a computer," Bartlett said.

A voice from the crowd, belonging to easily the tallest man there, practically chirped out, "Neither do you, sir!"

"Hey, zip it, Davenport!" Bartlett practically barked as more scattered laughter spread through the crowd, their comrade being scolded only making the laughter worse. The Davenport guy took it in stride, still smiling but not disobeying the order. Hamilton looked annoyed, but Genette took cues from Bartlett and the other officers and couldn't help but smile at the exchange. Bartlett went on with an

almost exasperated look on his face. "Anyways…guess most introductions are out of the way, then. You'll learn to tell everyone apart before long either way, at least as far as all of our nuggets are concerned."

"'Nuggets', sir?" Genette couldn't help but ask. It was a pretty odd name, and not one he'd ever heard before.

"They're the 'kids' Svenson was referring to," Bartlett said, gesturing out to the pilots and RIOs gathered around.

Not for the first time Genette was made aware of them, taking a closer look now and picking out those that stood out the most to him. A pretty woman of average height with short dark hair and eyes, looking almost delicate in appearance and build, hardly looking like a soldier. Davenport, the man that had spoken up before, with black hair styled in a particular way with bright, blue eyes. A short young woman with a dark complexion and wide brown eyes. The scrawny young man and the woman Hamilton had looked at before. A man with a blank expression and harsh looking eyes standing beside a shorter, older looking man with a soft smile on his face.

All of them seemed more interested in conversations between themselves than their instructors and the newcomers. Most of them were in their earlier or mid-twenties, though, the same age as Genette. So, these were the 'nuggets', then. If everything he'd heard was true, they would all be well on their way to great heights as far as their careers were concerned. Quite literally, in fact.

"I see. Well, I'm looking forward to seeing what you all have in store," Genette said, taking a deep breath. He was mainly talking to Bartlett, but he was sure he spoke loudly enough they could all hear him. "I suppose I should let you all get back to work, now. Apologies for disturbing your lesson."

"Nah, don't apologize. They'd have found some way to slack off anyways," Bartlett said, already stepping away. He glanced at Hamilton, then back to Genette. "But you're welcome to hang out if you really want. I promise you aren't gonna miss anything, though. The real fun doesn't start until we get up in the air."

"Yes, as much fun as that sounds, there's still some things we need to take care of. So I'm afraid I'll have to cut this conversation short," Hamilton answered for him, and while Genette admittedly would have liked to sit in on whatever was being taught to get the full experience of what work was done here, Hamilton was unfortunately right. He looked at the 'nuggets' before he spoke again. "Which reminds me…Second Lieutenant Davenport! A word, please."

Davenport glanced at Bartlett and the other instructors before he reacted, almost with a look that was a mix of worry and confusion. Likely afraid his joke earlier had landed him in trouble or something like that, but Bartlett reluctantly nodded with an annoyed look replacing the one he'd been wearing beforehand. Hamilton waited for Davenport to start to make his way between all of his companions before he started back towards the hangar doors, Genette following close behind as Bartlett began to speak once more as though the entire conversation hadn't happened.

Once they were out of earshot of the others so as not to disturb them, Hamilton stopped and turned around, waiting for Davenport to catch up. In just a few strides at a light jog, Davenport caught up to them both and came to a halt. He straightened up, taking a deep breath as he stood at attention. In a forced, overly formal manner of speaking he said, "Captain Hamilton, sir. May I ask what the problem is?"

"At ease. Unless there's anything I don't know about, you aren't in trouble, Lieutenant," Hamilton said, straight to the point. Davenport relaxed almost immediately. "I have other matters to attend to, and seeing as we've assigned Genette here to your quarters I was hoping I could ask you to familiarize him with the base and the barracks?"

"Ah. Right, I remember you mentioned somethin' like that the other day…" Davenport said under his breath, though judging from the way he looked almost embarrassed it was more or less clear that he had forgotten until his memory was jogged. He recovered quickly, putting on a cheerful smile as he looked to Genette. "Guess we're roommates now, huh? I'll be happy to show you around. Not that there's much to see, really, but y'know how it is."

Genette smiled, reaching out to offer what would be his third handshake that day. Davenport accepted it, though he did seem a bit put off by it. "Thank you, Lieutenant, I'll do my best not to disturb your routine."

"Forget that 'Lieutenant' crap, man, you can just call me Chopper. Everyone around here does," Davenport – or Chopper, rather – said, waving the title off.

Hamilton kept his composure, ignoring Chopper and giving another smile to Genette as he gave a quick nod. "Since that's settled, I'll be on my way. Pleasure to meet you, Genette, feel free to come speak to me if you run into any trouble."

And with another nod and a quick 'Lieutenant' in acknowledgement towards Chopper, he quickly set off on his way at a brisk pace, disappearing from view as he exited the hangar and rounded the corner of the door, leaving the two of them to finish what he started. Admittedly, after having an early start to the day, a lengthy flight out here, and all of the introductions he'd just been ran through at a rapid fire pace, Genette found himself in need of a good rest and some time to get himself settled in.

Right away the impression Chopper gave off was that of an outspoken, extroverted individual, just judging from the first few interactions. Genette was good at getting along with all types of people, so he was sure that he'd have no trouble with Chopper. At the very least, everyone he'd met so far had certainly made an impression, and Chopper was no exception. His haircut reminded him of a rock 'n roll musician, almost, and was probably just barely in regs, and he seemed the type to test his limits with his superiors. He wasn't an instructor, but he definitely came off as one of the 'interesting individuals' Hamilton had mentioned.

"If you want, we can swing by the barracks first, get you acquainted with crew quarters," Chopper said as soon as Hamilton was gone, gesturing over his shoulder in some vague direction with his thumb. "It's not too hard to find your way around, I promise. I only got lost a couple of times my first week."

Genette couldn't really tell if he was joking or not, though judging

from his awkward chuckle it was at least an attempt at one. "Lead the way. I don't think it would look good if I started wandering around unsupervised, would it?"

"Eh, there aren't any secrets out here worth protecting. C'mon, let's get this tour over and done with," Chopper said with a dry laugh, heading outside. Genette was quick to follow, having to squint as his eyes once again adjusted to the change in lighting. They only made it a few steps before Chopper suddenly seemed to remember something. "Oh, yeah, I'll bet Hamilton didn't bother checking with you, so I probably should give you a heads up. Er…do you have a problem with dogs or an allergy or anything like that?"

"No, not at all," Genette said. He'd been right, Hamilton hadn't asked him anything like that. Curious, he asked, "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, well, it's kind of a long story, but years ago some pilot took in this stray puppy and somehow talked his superiors into keeping him around. Then they thought it was a great idea to turn him into the squadron mascot I think?" Chopper said, recounting the story to him at rapid fire pace as they walked. "Anyways, I'm kinda fuzzy on the details, but when I first got here was right when that guy was planning to retire and he didn't want the dog anymore or… something like that, I dunno. But at that point I was pretty familiar with the dog and I love 'em to death, so I volunteered to take him in."

At that point Chopper found another story to tell along the way, which turned into another as he jumped from topic to topic. It was better than an awkward silence, so Genette had no issue keeping the conversation going even though he was hardly contributing to it. He may as well get acquainted with the people he was going to be working around for however long this assignment may have lasted.

And so, his first day at Sand Island got off to a proper start.

Cape Landers, Osea.

September 23rd, 2010.

1109hrs.

An alarm blared through the cockpit as Bartlett made an abrupt turn and leveled out, catching Genette off guard. The sound set him on edge, as what was supposed to be a standard training exercise seemed to be taking an unexpected turn of events as it started to draw to a close. As Genette looked over the various instruments before him trying to pinpoint the position of the rest of Wardog Squadron with only a baseline knowledge of how everything functioned, Bartlett began to curse at the interruption.

"Dammit! Gimme a break, would ya? I'm babysittin' nuggets up here!" Bartlett snapped over the radio as Genette kept the camera fixed on the back of his seat, not having stopped his recording in spite of the new development and his rise in anxiety. He wished he could gauge Bartlett's reaction, to tell whether he was feeling the same dread that Genette was or not, but something told him knowing their leader was rattled would only make matters worse for the squadron.

"Command Room to Wardog Squadron, we have leakers, aircraft type currently unknown. Crossing the border at Cape Landers, bearing 278 to 302," the voice of some top brass on the ground sounded in response, almost sounding apologetic. "Captain Bartlett, your flight is the only group close enough to make the intercept. I'm afraid there isn't anyone we can call back to provide additional support."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah…I get it," Bartlett grumbled, and over the various screens and radar Genette was able to get a look at the aircraft ahead of them. Several blips appeared on radar, the designation of each of the pilots and their backseaters appearing where the squadron was positioned, the unknowns marked down as such. Bartlett was quick to take control of the situation. "Baker, Svenson, go trail and stay close! The three of us'll go high and make the intercept. Engage only if necessary. All other aircraft, stay low and out of the fight! Got it?"

Everyone sounded off one by one as the other two instructors pulled their aircraft into a tighter formation around Bartlett's aircraft, one of them making a pass over the cockpit that Genette made sure to

catch on camera. Although his nerves were already shocked, this was his job. He'd keep recording however long he could last, already feeling himself growing nauseous at the unexpected maneuvers.

Bartlett tracked the movement of his allies in his eyes, leaning over and craning his neck as a small group of the trainees began to form up and follow the order he'd given to lower their altitude. He made sure they were clear before he increased his speed and brought the aircraft into a roll, the movement enough to make Genette throw up though he managed to keep himself together. Bartlett called to him, "Hang on back there, Genette, there's a chance this could get bumpy!"

Genette couldn't bring himself to speak, afraid if he opened his mouth he was going to lose his breakfast. Which was the last thing he wanted to do, knowing full well someone was going to have to clean it up when all was said and done and he'd be too embarrassed if anyone but him was saddled with that task. He braced himself, trying to remember everything he'd been taught during the high-g training he'd undergone, between his breathing and the straining maneuver he wasn't sure how much longer he'd be able to last.

The first three aircraft, led by Bartlett, all began to close in on the position, but above the clouds there wasn't anything. All of the instruments showed they were closing in on the unidentified aircraft and their positions, but Genette couldn't see anything from where he sat no matter how much he tried to get a better view. In the front seat he heard Bartlett mutter something under his breath to express his own confusion and concerns.

Something felt off, but Genette wasn't quite sure what until the voice of one of the trainee's RIOs sounded over the radio. It was the number seven aircraft, the one being piloted by the delicate young woman he'd seen the day of first, though her name as well as that of her backseater wasn't coming to mind to him. The round of introductions that morning had been mostly forgotten after the thrill of the training exercises and now this.

"Hey, tell me I'm not going crazy over here, but the coordinates they

gave look off to me," the man said, having a slight, barely discernible accent on a few of the vowel sounds. He didn't sound fully Osean, that was for sure. "Edge, do you have a visual on them?"

"Hard to tell with the sun in my eyes, but…wait, what the–" the voice of the woman replied softly, then suddenly she raised her voice to an urgent cry. "This is Wardog 7, we've got the enemy aircraft right in front of us!"

"The hell?!" Another one of the trainees responded. "Shit, they're opening fire –!"

The transmission suddenly cut to static and then silence, and more confused and frightened cries sounded out from the trainees as a handful of others were cut off in the same manner. Genette didn't have to be a genius to figure out what was happening, and neither did Bartlett as he suddenly veered off from the formation and into a dive to the clouds below them towards the trainees.

"Shit! What the hell is going on!" Bartlett shouted, not waiting for the other instructors to follow. Genette couldn't be sure, paying more attention to the fact he could feel his stomach in his throat, but he had a feeling they were right behind them. "Someone better talk to me!"

"Captain, they're picking us off!" came the response of one of the pilots before he let out a startled cry along with his RIO. Bartlett's aircraft broke through the clouds just in time to see the unidentified aircraft shoot down the trainee's F-4, a missile connecting with the engine and setting the entire thing on fire. They never had a chance to bail out.

Everything happened so fast, Genette wasn't sure how he was still hanging on as Bartlett jumped on the tail of one of the bandits and lined up a shot with the machine gun. A spray of bullets on the wing of the enemy was enough to disable it, the pilot apparently choosing to try their luck saving the aircraft instead of punching out. The aircraft turned, ready to keep fighting, and at that point Bartlett was already going after another target glued to the tail of one of his men. An explosion directly behind them told Genette that either Baker or

Svenson had finished the job, the two of them splitting off after.

Genette caught sight of them tangling with the enemy aircraft, trying to draw their fire away from the trainees, but they'd all been taken by surprise. The blips on radar were slowly disappearing, and Genette was able to make out fewer and fewer Osean F-4s, met instead by the sight of the unknown fighters going up against them. Only one of the trainees had gotten their act together and was able to retaliate, holding their own alongside their teacher. He figured out quickly the only one keeping up with them was Wardog 7.

"Edge, Dogma, get your asses outta here! Retreat with the others!" Bartlett yelled out to her as Baker ordered the trainees to withdraw, vowing to keep the enemy focused on them so they could make their escape. But with so few of them left it was suicide to turn their back to the enemy. "Dammit, do you hear me Nagase?!"

It seemed her RIO, Dogma, agreed wholeheartedly as he tried to implore Nagase to listen to him. "Shit, do you honestly think we stand a chance out here? Follow the damn orders or we're gonna end up like everyone else!"

"Negative, I'm not letting them take out anymore!" Nagase answered, though whether she was talking to her superiors that way or to Dogma that way Genette couldn't tell. Everyone cursed in reply, but no one said anything else to stop her. With the way she maneuvered, fluid and flawless movements almost like a bird, Genette was pretty sure she could hold her own. She was probably the only one that had a heads-up, courtesy of her tail position and Dogma's observation that something had been off.

Genette heard Roberts – Svenson's RIO, he didn't know his callsign – cry out a warning to Svenson, but he couldn't see where the two of them were. Their transmission was cut off not long after. Baker took a hit immediately after that, having taken a missile for one of the trainees that was shot down a moment later. At the rate they were all dropping, Genette wondered if they even stood a chance of making it out alive, and at the age of twenty-five he was certain his life started to flash before his eyes.

As Bartlett accelerated and pulled his aircraft's nose straight up,

Genette felt his head start to spin as though he had a head rush. His stomach twisted and all of his muscles ached in protest to the prolonged maneuvers, and as the tunnel vision began to set in he could feel himself fading fast as Bartlett remained glued to the enemy's tail. All Genette saw before his vision went completely black was a burst of flame and debris flying at the aircraft as Bartlett moved to level out.

In his ears he could faintly hear the voices of the pilots calling out orders and the two RIOs calling out warnings, Nagase the only remaining trainee and Bartlett the only fully combat capable instructor. All conversation, warnings, and gunfire sounded almost muffled to Genette, as though he could hear them but was unable to process all of it.

Everything faded to nothingness a few moments later, as if the world around him ceased to exist.

Author's Note: *Well, I honestly didn't expect to start this before* Three Strikes *was finished, but here we are.*

I had the inspiration so I ran with it, and this was the result. The first mission shouldn't be too far behind, and of course I'm still working on the next chapter of Three Strikes *. With my track record balancing two different projects, I have no idea how often updates for this are going to be, but I have everything together for this one more than I did for my previous attempts at secondary projects so I don't plan to abandon it. I don't plan to abandon* Three Strikes *, either, and I'm mainly focusing on that one with this on the side for when I've hit a rut but still want my fix of* Ace Combat *writing.*

Anyways, right out of the gate you should notice a few changes. One, everyone's starting out in the F-4 before we go to the F-14 because I wanted the RIOs in the story from the beginning. Second of all, the RIOs themselves! They exist and I'm so excited to be able to work with them! We'll be meeting the rest next chapter as well as giving Nagase and Dogma proper introductions, but a few of them were described already. And also character ages. Most of them are the same, but I've made Genette younger and it hasn't been brought

up but Chopper is 24 instead of 28. Snow is 29 instead of 34...etc. There aren't many others I've changed, but those are the most drastic ones.

There's a lot more I want to change and expand on and anyone that's read Three Strikes *should be seeing some familiar faces/ names along the way. And everyone should be aware Blaze is a girl in my setting as well.*

Quick disclaimer, as always rigid realism is not my goal nor is religiously sticking to canon. My goal is to expand on the characters, their relationships, the world around them, and the lore within it. The characters and the stories are the sole reason I play these games and what inspired me to write for them. Fanfic is for fun *, which is why I wrote this.*

So, that being said...thank you for reading!

I hope y'all enjoyed the start and stick around for another crazy ride!

Squadron of the West Isle

Chapter One: Squadron of the West Isle

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Sand Island Air Force Base, Ceres Ocean.

***September 23rd, 2010* .**

1230hrs.

|...|...|...|

Kathryn Hamilton stared out the office window, her eyes fixed on the sky outside as she thought about the training sortie she was missing out on. Not many pilots were left behind but the ones that were all seemed to be perfectly fine with having the morning off. Kathryn on the other hand was not, mainly because she'd been called into the adjutant base commander's office. And the adjutant base commander on Sand Island just so happened to be her older brother, five years her senior.

So there she stood, looking everywhere but at him as he went over a report from the last time she'd flown quiet as can be. She found him far more intimidating than their father, probably because their father hadn't been around for the first five or so years of her life and Allen had stepped up to help their aunt and uncle raise her as well as himself. The older he got the more serious he became, always having been intense and focused but now having actual authority to go along with it. She bent over backwards for her family to take her seriously and yet she was waiting to be scolded as though she was a child. It was enough to make her blood boil, but she kept quiet.

At last her brother let out a sigh, leaning back in his seat and drawing her attention to him. He tapped his pen on the papers, eyes flicking up at her. With the way he glared at her he could have burned a hole through her head. "You do know that if it weren't for my recommendation you probably wouldn't be standing here right

now?"

"You mean here specifically? Because I can't say I'm all that grateful if that's the case," Kathryn said, knowing full well that he was her superior officer and she should treat him with respect. But she wasn't going to stand here and be talked down to by someone she could blackmail with baby pictures. As far as she was concerned when that door was closed they were equals, not that he saw it that way.

"Cut it out, you know *exactly* what I meant," Allen said, keeping his voice level but stern. God, she hated when he did that. "I'm your brother and I sang your praises to the top brass after hearing you'd grown as a pilot. When you act out it reflects badly on me…among others far more concerned about keeping up appearances than I am."

"Look, we were told to trust our instincts and that's exactly what I did. It isn't my fault Dogma can't stand not being in control," Kathryn said, jumping to defend herself. She shouldn't have really blamed him, given how by the book he was and the fact she definitely did not do things 'by the book'. The person she should have been trusting in the air was the one person she wanted nothing more than to strangle as soon as they landed. "Speaking of, why the hell am I here getting lectured and he's nowhere to be seen?"

"Lieutenant Gallagher requested he fly with a different pilot, so we paired him with Lieutenant Nagase. Right now he's out at Cape Landers with Captain Bartlett's flight," Allen told her, and she felt her fists clench. *Lucky bastard* . Her brother continued before she could say anything to it. "Captain Bartlett felt he might bring better balance to Lieutenant Nagase's passiveness, since the two of you did nothing but clash in the air. He's supposed to be your teammate and you don't even listen to him half the time."

"Dogma's just an ass kissing prick trying to get cozy with you and the rest of the brass…" Kathryn muttered, not making an effort to keep him from hearing. Dogma wasn't an easy person to get along with, that was no secret. She knew Lieutenant Nagase well, sharing a room with her in fact, and she wondered how on earth those two were gonna fly together. All three of them were overachievers, but in

different ways. Nagase was the subtle type, while Dogma tended to be louder about it, and Kathryn despite her introversion made it her effort to be just as loud. She had to just to be heard. But she had other concerns at the moment. "So what am I supposed to do now?"

Allen sighed, leaning forward in his seat and going over a file. Probably a different report, Kathryn didn't really pay attention to it. He spoke as he skimmed the papers. "While I personally would like to teach you a lesson…especially given the fact that stunt you pulled endangered six different people, your own wingman and his backseater included," he said, glaring at her once again for emphasis and causing her to roll her eyes as he went on, "I unfortunately was not given a say in the matter. Captain Bartlett sees something in you, though *what* exactly I don't know anymore. He wants you to fly with Lieutenant Pierce."

Kathryn recognized that name. He was on the older side, maybe only a few years younger than Captain Bartlett, and seemingly friendly and relaxed all the time. The name he'd gotten saddled with was 'Clown', courtesy of that talkative guy, Chopper. Those two got along well, but somehow Clown was stuck sitting in the reserves most of the time. Way too many people to juggle around. She'd only spoken to him a few times, but she got the impression he was easygoing. Chopper had claimed Clown was too clever for his own good, though, able to wait and seize opportunities the pilot didn't even notice.

Of all the people she expected to be flying with, it hadn't been him. But she'd take easygoing over Dogma and that stick he had shoved up his ass. She looked down at her brother, weighing what other options she had. It seemed this wasn't a 'take it or leave it' scenario, though. "What did he do for you to want to shove him in the cockpit with me?"

"You think you're a regular Maverick, don't you?" Allen asked rhetorically with a shake of his head. She opened her mouth to say something, but he cut her off. "Don't take that as a compliment, I'm calling out your ego. To answer your question, he didn't ' *do* ' anything. Bartlett and Captain Baker wanted to reorganize things for the sake of balancing things in the air. Your tendency to fly off the handle was supposed to be reined in by Lieutenant Gallagher's

strictness, but instead you two couldn't even work together."

"That's not entirely my fault," Kathryn put in.

Allen ignored her and kept talking as though she hadn't said anything. "Clown needs more experience and he gets along with almost everyone. If you aren't able to work with him then I'm going to assume you're a lost cause."

Kathryn swallowed, feeling a knot forming in her throat. She didn't pull stupid stunts all the time, but when she did she made sure they counted, and every time she answered for it. As though she hadn't been taught those maneuvers by someone. A 'lost cause' was how she felt sometimes, like her whole career was a waste of her time. Quietly, she told him, "I'm just as good a pilot as you are, if you gave me half a chance to prove it."

"Here's your chance. Listen to your instincts *and* your partner, instead of throwing both your careers down the drain," Allen said, and she hated to admit he could be right. "Otherwise, I'm sure Dad would love to hear why you've been shipped back home with your tail between your legs."

At the mention of their father she snapped her head up and felt her heart rate quicken, but she kept her expression blank. Crossing her arms, she glanced over her shoulder, wanting to be anywhere but in that office. It felt like she was in a cage and she'd reached her limit. "May I be dismissed or do you intend to stare me down for another half hour?"

"Believe it or not, Ryn, I don't want to see you fail. You *are* a good pilot, you're just not a great one," Allen said to her, and the tone of voice he used wasn't mocking. In fact, it was almost soft. The way he would speak whenever they got into fights and he would almost apologize. She didn't look at him, and after a few seconds of silence and trying to get a reaction from him he admitted defeat and his voice returned to normal. "You're free to go. This was mostly just a formality."

Kathryn nodded, turning without a second thought. "Good day, then, Captain."

"Kathryn." Right as she put her hand on the doorknob he called out to her, and she stopped, waiting. He sighed, as though he regretted trying to say anything else, but to her back he said, "Would you please be more careful and start using that head of yours? You're smart. You shouldn't have to prove that."

Kathryn said nothing to that, taking in a deep breath and opening the door to his office. She avoided looking back as she stepped out, pulling the door shut behind her with a heavy clack. In the hallways she was met with an almost blinding shift in lighting and tone, courtesy of the white LEDs against dark linoleum tiles and blank white walls. There was plenty of natural light to be had around there at least, meaning the light wasn't as hard on the eyes during the day, but it still required an adjustment.

Around her was the sounds of soldiers chatting as they walked around and went about their day, the activity a welcomed change from the uncomfortable silence in her brother's office. A few soldiers, none of them pilots, passed by at a light jog, clearly having somewhere important to be given that they barely gave anyone any warning of their approach or time to get out of the way. Waiting for her directly across from the door, leaning against the wall and staying out of the way, she was met by the familiar face of Airman Hans Grimm.

She almost felt relieved as soon as she saw him, knowing him better than just about anyone on the base save for her brother. Only two months apart in age, she'd known him since she was about six years old, when her father returned from his travels and moved himself and his kids out to the middle of nowhere and bought a bunch of land. As it turned out they ended up next door (as next door as you can be to someone that's almost thirty minutes down the road) to one of her father's buddies, who just so happened to be Hans' uncle. The two of them had been friends ever since, not like they had many choices in the town they grew up in.

Hans joining the air force had ended up being the last straw for her. First her brother, then her father's history as a pilot and Hans' uncle, then Hans' brother joining the OGDF which inspired Hans to strive to be a pilot. Kathryn had no direction, she was just as smart and enamored with aircraft as anyone else, so she'd applied to the Air

Defense Force Academy right out of high school. They'd both been ahead in their studies, and an early graduation saw them pilots at the age of twenty. Just like when they were growing up, they'd been inseparable during their training. In fact, Hans got the assignment from Allen's recommendation just like she had.

As soon as he heard the door shut he lifted his head up to look at her, green-brown eyes lit up with concern. The freckles all over his face almost made him look younger than he was. Before she could greet him, he asked, "So, how'd it go?"

"Not as bad as I expected. Just got chewed out and informed Dogma won't fly with me anymore," Kathryn responded with a shrug, not really wanting to think about the conversation the rest of the day. It was over and done with, she may as well move on.

"Were you really surprised? Captain Bartlett had been impressed, but I thought Captain Svenson was going to kill you on the spot," Hans said, almost looking amused, straightening up and lightly pushing himself off of the wall. He took a few steps towards her. "But seriously, though, sooner or later you're gonna end up pushing your luck too far."

"I had an opening so I took it. In a real dogfight Bartlett would have been dead," Kathryn said, admittedly tired of defending herself. The more she thought about it, the more she admitted it was reckless. Maybe Allen had just ruined her mood.

"Yeah, and you and Dogma along with him, probably," Hans pointed out, and she lightly jabbed him with her elbow. He was right, though, they had narrowly avoided a collision up there. She knew better now, they could all just drop it.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. Captain Hamilton already lectured me from his high horse," Kathryn said, lowering his voice as a group of soldiers passed by. She started down the hallway, intending to track down Clown, hearing Hans fall into step beside her without questioning a thing. Still, she may as well offer him some conversation as they walk. "Apparently Bartlett wants me to fly with Clown from now on."

"That's the third backseater you've chased off since Heierlark," Hans

said, his voice bordering on concerned and scolding. "If you didn't want to have to work with someone else in the air then you should have found some way to get in on that F-22 program or something. You'd have been saved a lot of trouble."

"Right, then I'd be around a bunch of hotshots with inflated egos causing problems instead of me," Kathryn said with an irritated sigh, recalling the types they'd met in flight school. It was an amazing aircraft, but not something she thought was worth it, and no one would have let her near one anyways. Her callsign wasn't 'Blaze' for no reason, if there was a way to burn out a multi-million zollar aircraft she'd probably find a way. "I'd seriously doubt I'd last very long…"

It wasn't like she tried to make problems, it just ended up happening. She wasn't disrespectful on purpose, she just…didn't like to follow orders sometimes. If she had a better idea she ran with it, and she didn't care to check with her comrades. And she didn't trust them all that much either, and the feeling usually ended up being mutual. It probably didn't help that she had a tendency to get snappy and smart with people. Honestly, it was a miracle she hadn't bombed out at flight school. The fact they let her fly anything at all was good enough for her, and maybe she'd have better luck working with Clown.

Hans was far more anxious and shy than she was, but somehow he'd made more friends than she ever had. The mechanics around base knew them both well, but only Pops ever really gave Kathryn the time of day, while all of them liked having Hans around. Maybe he was just easier to give orders when he was helping out, she wasn't really sure. He also spent more time in the hangars than she did, having been sitting idle all of this time while everyone else had flown at least once. He wasn't confident in his abilities, and the fact he wasn't flying didn't help, but he was an amazing shot. He could hone in on just about any target and hit it with perfect accuracy, air and ground alike. It had earned him the moniker of 'Archer' long ago.

Still, he always stayed humble and maybe even insecure. Maybe his lack of confidence was why he almost never flew, and when he did it was for very basic maneuvers. He probably could have thrived in a different setting, instead he ended up stuck here with her. Kathryn

was grateful to have him around in any case, it made life on the humid hell that was Sand Island a lot easier to tolerate.

As they finally reached the door leading outside, Hans chose to change the subject. "I heard from the mechanics that Bartlett took almost everyone up. Apparently the base commander wanted to put on a show for that journalist guy."

"Heh, like that's a surprise." Kathryn couldn't help but give a slight snort. Orson Perrault was one of the most self-righteous and annoying people she'd ever met. She'd bet good money that he was the one that wanted her brother to talk to her, and could have even threatened his position. She wouldn't put it past him.

"What'd you think of him yesterday anyways?" Hans asked.

"I'm not sure, we didn't really get a chance to speak," Kathryn said, recalling the class he'd shown up at yesterday. He'd looked them all over, and he looked like a kid at Christmas. Or he would have if not for the goatee thing on his chin. She gave a small smile. "I almost feel bad that he's sharing a room with Chopper."

"At least he won't run out of entertainment, I guess," Hans gave a soft chuckle. He was right, too, be it constant conversation or hundreds of rock albums to listen to. Chopper was a good guy from what she could tell, if not a bit much to deal with at times.

Their walk from the main HQ on base all the way out to the first hangar wasn't all that long, but thanks to the weather it felt like an eternity. She'd spent most of her life living in southern parts of Osea and she'd always hated the weather. Summers were hell, and while it was starting to cool off at the mainland by now the island still felt like a tropical paradise. Kathryn preferred the harsher winters of Aurick and what they had to put up with at Heierlark and the mild summers any day.

Due to the humidity and heat, the hangars always felt stuffy and miserable. The doors were always wide open when people were working or teaching, and even with the gigantic fans on the ceiling it was still awful. When they arrived at the hangar it was mostly empty, and the few aircraft that remained were simply being inspected by

the ground crews. Pops, easily the best mechanic on the base, often did these inspections himself. Sure enough, he was one of the only ones around when Kathryn and Hans arrived.

A few of the maintenance crew hung out here and there, keeping to themselves and their conversations. The only people besides Pops that Kathryn recognized was Lieutenant Cruise, who normally would be flying with Bartlett if not for the fact that Genette guy had taken her seat for the exercise, and then Clown. They seemed to be talking to Pops, though Kathryn couldn't hear what was being said. Their footsteps echoed as they approached, drawing the three's attention towards them.

Pops smiled in greeting, looking almost sympathetically at Kathryn. He'd been present when she'd been ordered to report to Allen. "Hey, you two. Been wondering if you were kicked off the base yet."

The joke succeeded in lifting the mood, as Kathryn couldn't help but give an embarrassed laugh while Hans chuckled. Almost no one gave any indication they knew she and Allen were related, so they probably didn't even know the half of it. Only Hans and their superiors probably knew since that as well as her father's identity was on display in her record for all to see. As far as anyone cared, they just had the same last name, and no one cared to pry into that no matter their suspicions. Even if they did, Allen would waste no time throwing under her bus just to prove he didn't play favorites or to completely disavow any relation to her.

They came to a halt, and Lieutenant Cruise nodded to her. "Sorry you had to be sent down there," she said to her, offering a small smile. "Bartlett tried to get them to lay off you, but you know how Gallagher and Svenson can get. Sticklers for the textbook and all that."

"Eh, they ain't all that bad, poor Blaze just caught 'em on a bad day, that's all," Clown said with a short laugh, jumping to her defense. Already she knew she'd enjoy flying with him more than Dogma. His accent reminded her of home, a far thicker one than her own that only came out every so often and the dialect slightly different, but familiar all the same. "Anyway, guess Captain Hamilton told you the news then, huh?"

"Yeah, he told me. Sorry you had to get dragged into this," Kathryn said, feeling bad now that she knew he was already made aware of the situation.

"Not a problem at all, I don't mind it," Clown said with a shrug, a smile still present on his face. He sounded genuine to her. "Beats sittin' on the ground. Besides, I've seen you fly. I'd say we're gonna get along just fine."

"You've seen her fly and you're ready to go up with her just like that?" Pops asked, looking over his shoulder from what he was doing. He meant it in a playful way, just like his comment from before. "Guess you two are made for each other, then."

Hans looked surprised that Clown was so willing, even Kathryn found herself caught off guard by it. "At least you know what you're getting into, I guess."

Before anything else could be said, the familiar roar of Wardog Squadron's F-4s in the distance cutting them off before they could say anything else. Right away something was off, not only because one of them sounded like it was barely in the air but because it didn't sound the way it should have for how many aircraft had been sent up. The others picked up on it, with Cruise and Pops both staring outside with their brows furrowed in suspicion.

"Sounds like they're back, but…" Cruise said slowly.

The quiet on the ground quickly evolved into chaos and fear as the ground crew began shouting orders and running about, the only clear order that Kathryn could hear over the sound of the approaching fighters being 'clear the runway!". That was enough to grab their attention, and Kathryn broke into a jog to reach the hangar doors, Hans and the others not far behind her.

Only three aircraft had returned, two of them circling about overhead as the third made its approach for landing while trailing smoke the whole way. It wobbled more than it should have been, likely the result of the engine close to complete failure, and they'd brought fire crews out likely to mitigate the damage if they were able to. They never got the chance to do their job, though, as the landing gear

hadn't even hit the tarmac before the engine finally gave out. The aircraft veered off course, the wing slamming into the ground as it ignited. Kathryn and the others stood there helplessly, watching in horror as the wreckage burned off to the side of the runway.

Everyone on the fire crew rushed to the aircraft crew's aid, but one look at that explosion and the fire and anyone could see there probably wasn't any hope for them. Kathryn felt the shock wearing off, fear replacing it as she looked to the sky as the other two aircraft continued to circle overhead, just as helpless as everyone on the ground was. Only one thing was running through her mind.

What the hell happened out there?

1330hrs.

As soon as Genette felt his feet hit the ground below him he stumbled forward a few steps before he doubled over and the contents of his stomach were promptly hurled onto the pavement. He coughed and sputtered, gagging once more as the taste and smell of vomit worsened his nausea. It was embarrassing to say the least, especially once he realized how many people witnessed the event, but his mind was reeling with everything he'd seen in the air and his body did not appreciate the dogfight he'd been through.

After he passed out he missed the rest of the battle until Bartlett managed to rouse him from his sleep. At that point they'd already entered the immediate airspace around the island, and whatever had come of the fighters they'd engaged was a mystery to him. His camera had continued recording even while he was unconscious, though without Genette to hold it up he guessed the footage wouldn't show much. He'd ended the recording as soon as he came to his senses, something he was relieved he'd remembered to do after what had happened when they'd been cleared for landing.

The wreckage of Baker's aircraft was no longer burning, ground crew already working to clear it away. What remained of Baker and his RIO's bodies had been covered and rushed away, leaving Genette among the only four survivors of the incident. To think those

two had survived the fight only to crash on landing like that. Genette and the others had been too shocked by what had happened to have any real reaction to it at the time, and he realized that still stood as Bartlett approached him with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Hey, you doin' okay over here? Do I need to send someone to fetch the doctor for you?" Bartlett asked, seeming genuinely concerned in his offer rather than mocking Genette for not being made of tougher stuff.

Genette took deep breaths, wiping off his mouth with the back of his glove before he removed it and pulled it inside out. Those would need washing now. His hands were trembling and the burning sensation in his throat didn't ease, but he doubted he'd need medical attention. Straightening up, he adjusted his camera bag on his shoulder and finally mustered the strength to answer Bartlett. "No. No, I'm fine," he said with a shake of his head, suppressing a cough.

"You sure?" Bartlett asked him, raising a brow. Genette nodded, trying to gather his strength before he said anything else. The Captain also nodded in acknowledgement. "Alright, if you're sure. But remember, if you pass out here and you're gonna wake up with a nasty concussion."

"That shouldn't be an issue, but thank you," Genette said, shoving the gloves he'd been wearing into the pocket of the flight suit he'd been issued. Right now he was more concerned about their companions, the only trainee duo out of six to make it back alive. They both looked more shaken than he was. "But what about them?"

At that, Bartlett approached the two without a word. Genette kept his distance, but followed a few paces behind, curiously peering around Bartlett at them. The pilot, Kei Nagase, stood motionless beside her aircraft as her RIO, Jason Gallagher, finally exited the cockpit and joined her on the ground. Bartlett's voice was low, so Genette couldn't hear what was said to them, he couldn't hear their responses either but they must have confirmed they were holding up just fine. As Bartlett nodded and turned away they both looked at

him, Gallagher – or rather, Dogma as he'd been called in the air – looked away first, shaking his head and scoffing as he muttered something to Nagase.

Before Bartlett could relay anything to Genette, the woman that would have been flying with Bartlett today had it not been for Genette's arrival came jogging towards them. The look on her face was pure fear and confusion, a look shared by the three other students Genette remembered seeing in that class as they watched the scene from a good distance away. Lieutenant Cruise spoke before she even reached them. "Jack! What the hell happened to you guys out there?!"

The use of his first name over his rank or surname didn't seem to bother him at all as he turned to face her. Something caused him to hold back before he answered her, taking a deep breath before he told her, "We ran into a little trouble, that's all."

"Yeah, no kidding. Where's the rest of the squadron?" Cruise demanded, her blue eyes wide. She already knew the answer, Bartlett's silence and uncomfortable sigh the only confirmation she needed. She lowered her voice, her shock from before refusing to dissipate. "Jesus…does the base commander have any clue what's going on?"

"They didn't issue an alert here?" Bartlett asked her, and Cruise shook her head. He scoffed, shaking his head before he began to march away. It didn't seem to bother him that all of his flight gear was still on as he muttered to himself, "Figures…every single time something goes to shit they've gotta sweep it under the rug."

Cruise let him go without questioning him, likely still trying to process the loss of so many people. Genette, on the other hand, took off after him. His legs were still shaky, but he managed to keep control even with an awkward gait as he tried to catch up to and keep pace with Bartlett. Save for the few that had watched the disastrous landing, there weren't many people around and the atmosphere wasn't at all like what he'd have expected following the attack. The tension in the air from Bartlett was the only thing that made what had happened feel real.

Without a word Genette followed him a few feet before Bartlett broke the silence, glancing over his shoulder. "Sorry about this."

Genette couldn't find a good reason for the apology he'd just received. It wasn't his fault they'd run into those fighters or that they'd attacked them as soon as they'd intercepted. Nor was it his fault that they'd been given unreliable coordinates. In Genette's eyes the only people that should be apologizing were those that had been trusted to keep them in the know, but he knew that would never happen. Their mistake resulted in the deaths of sixteen people. Sixteen people that would not be returning home. And the only one that would bear the weight of that responsibility would likely be Bartlett himself.

Perhaps that was where his apology had come in, not that all the apologies in the world would have changed what happened. Genette looked over his shoulder, watching as Cruise approached Nagase and Dogma, saying something to them and maybe even trying to coax them out of the burning hot sun overhead and to the hangar where what remained of Bartlett's nuggets were waiting for them. They didn't move, Nagase shaking her head numbly. Genette thought back to the fight, wondering how such a timid young pilot had managed to be such a force in the air. He chose then to respond to the captain.

"It isn't your fault…there's no way anyone could have predicted what happened," Genette said, and it was the truth. Bartlett didn't respond, so he continued, wishing he could find something to say that might make the situation better. There wasn't much he could do, unfortunately. "Your squadron did the best that they could with the odds up there. You should be proud, you trained them well."

"Yeah, not well enough…" Bartlett grumbled, though his anger was at himself not at the pilots that had lost their lives. From what Genette could see he looked like he was barely keeping himself together.

"What about that pilot in the Number Seven? Lieutenant Nagase?" Genette asked him. She'd been the first to react and even managed to keep up with Bartlett's flying, at least that's how Genette remembered it before everything went dark. The aircraft was

spotless following the fight, just like Bartlett's, and thanks to her skill she and Dogma would live to see another day. "She was amazing. Did you see her fight back?"

"Are you kidding? I couldn't bear to watch," Bartlett said, slowing his pace and turning. Genette stopped, confused by the reaction as the captain turned to face Nagase, gesturing with his helmet as he raised his voice so she could hear him. It sounded like he was barely containing his anger, though Genette wondered how much of it was truly directed at her. "Nagase, you keep flying like that and you'll die real soon! Next time you follow my damn orders, do you hear me?"

Following his gaze to where Nagase stood, Genette noticed that she didn't look up at her superior. Everyone stared at her, and she seemed to avoid looking at any of them on purpose. Barely loud enough for anyone to hear, and certainly not shouting, she simply told him, "No. I won't die, sir…"

Brushing her bangs out of her face, she pressed a hand to her forehead as if she had a headache she was trying to fend off. She only lifted her gaze when Lieutenant Cruise gently rubbed her shoulder and set off with Dogma back towards the hangar, but she didn't move from where she stood. The woman Genette had learned was called 'Blaze' after she'd been dismissed earlier that morning walked out to where she stood, placing a hand on her shoulder as soon as she was by her side.

The quiet response from Nagase earned a scoff from Bartlett as he gave her a disbelieving look. "Pfft. Are you sure?" he said, turning back around and continuing on his way with a frustrated wave of his hand. "You look like you couldn't hurt a fly."

Genette remained where he stood, feeling a pang of sympathy for her. After what she'd just been through, he couldn't fault her for being so reserved. Something about her managed to grab his attention, and with the lighting being suitable he thought to document this moment for the sake of storytelling later on. He didn't have much else to offer given the state of things and the fact he hadn't had time to speak with any of the other trainees before they'd gone up that morning. It was hard to believe he'd only just met them

and still felt an ache in his chest thinking about them.

He slowly lifted his camera to his face, zooming in on her and adjusting the lens until he had a clear focus. Nagase noticed him out of the corner of her eye, slowly turning to face him as Blaze stood watching just out of the camera's frame. Nagase looked pale and exhausted, but regardless of this the edges of her mouth lifted slightly and her features softened as she tried to give him the best smile she could. Although faint, it was still visible, along with a scar on her chin that he hadn't noticed. Perhaps the only harsh thing about her face at all.

A light breeze displaced a few strands of her hair, and Genette chose to snap a small series of photos as the wind began to cease and her hair fell back in place. He lowered the camera, brought back to his surroundings as soon as he did. The only thing he could offer her was a smile that was both a mixture of grateful and sympathetic, which she barely could return before she turned to look at Blaze once more. Genette left them alone, turning once more to follow after Bartlett as they headed for the main building.

It took some time for Genette to catch up with Bartlett, and once he did the two of them said very little the rest of the way. As soon as they opened the frontmost door leading inside they were promptly met by several men and women in standard OADF fatigues moving about, papers in their hands. The muffled sounds of a few different telephones ringing could be heard behind many doors, all labeled to identify them as various command and intelligence unit offices. It was quiet, though there was a barely noticeable sense of urgency in their movements. The air conditioning was perhaps the only change inside, which Genette was grateful for.

The doors between the main building and the hallway leading to crew quarters had been shut, usually remaining propped open, though it wasn't locked as a few soldiers passed by on their way out from their rooms and exchanged confused and worried looks when they caught sight of Bartlett and Genette. No one asked the two any questions as they moved around everyone, on their way to the base commander's office down a different series of halls. As they finally came upon the base commander's office, they were greeted by two MPs exiting said office and promptly stopping them.

"Captain Bartlett, sir. Just the man we were looking for. Could we have a moment?" their commander asked, somewhat nervously though he held his ground.

"What's the matter?" Bartlett asked, though everyone here seemed to know exactly what the problem was. The MPs glanced at Genette and he felt his nausea from before returning as his nerves got the better of him. Bartlett also looked his way and must have caught Genette's expression before he turned back to the expectant MPs. "C'mon, after what just happened surely you can cut him some slack?"

"It's precisely because of what just happened that we've been given our orders, sir. I'm sorry, it's protocol," the MP answered, nodding to his companion.

Instantly the other MP approached Genette, holding his hand out expectantly. Genette was pretty sure he knew what they wanted, but he hesitated and the soldier that stood before him gave him a clear, firm order. "Hand over the camera, please, sir. It's a security violation."

Genette hesitated, unwilling to part with his camera. It wasn't something that had come cheap to him, and he'd have to go all the way back to the mainland in order to replace or repair any permanent damage done to it. Something that also wasn't going to come cheap. He looked at Bartlett, but both of them knew there wasn't anything that could be done. Sighing, he reluctantly removed the camera from around his neck and placed it in their hands, surrendering the bag as well in case they wanted to hassle him.

"Please, be careful," he almost pleaded as the MP practically jerked the camera bag away. It was enough to make him wince when he nonchalantly shoved the camera into the bag. All Genette could do was pray they didn't completely destroy it.

"Thank you for your cooperation. Good day." The MP from before gave a quick nod to both of them as he and his companion left them alone, pushing past them and leaving them standing almost dumbfounded outside the base commander's office. It was as though nothing happened.

"Unbelievable." Bartlett watched them go with an almost murderous look at Genette's expense before he turned to the office door, pulling it open with almost enough force to rip it off the hinges as he did.

The decked out office on the other side of the door belonged to Colonel Perrault, his name plastered on the plaque on the door, the name card on his desk, and various certificates, awards, and other medals he kept on display all over the walls. The Osean flag was set up in the corner of the room by the window, right across from the door. His desk sat with its back to that window, facing the door, and with the way he had it set up it almost might have looked like a throne if not for the basic wood and drab white walls surrounding him.

Colonel Perrault was a heavy-set, irritable man as Genette had learned the previous day. And now, as he stood alongside Bartlett having just interrupted a conversation he was having with Captain Hamilton it seemed Genette was about to get another taste of that. He turned his dark, beady eyes on them and scowled. "You've just saved me the trouble of calling you over here, Captain. Though I'd appreciate it if you'd learn to knock."

Hamilton, who had been standing with his back to the door in front of the desk, stepped off to the side and looked them over. He said nothing, though, almost looking concerned by the whole ordeal. Clearly he was privy to what had happened, something that likely wasn't the case for many other people on the base.

"That should be the least of your worries, *sir* ," Bartlett snapped, stressing the 'sir' in as disrespectful and mocking way as he could. He didn't bother to stand at any sort of attention, something that must have been common practice given the Colonel's eye roll and silence. "You mind telling me who the hell crossed our border today and why no one's doing a damn thing about it?"

"The situation is being investigated. It's hardly any of your concern, Captain," Perrault responded, trying to sound cool headed. He leaned back in his seat, a feat that took more effort than it should have. "Now, a better question would be why you engaged the unknown aircraft when you were under orders to intercept them."

Bartlett gave him an incredulous look. "They opened fire on us! What else did you expect me to do, invite 'em to talk over coffee?"

"I expected you to follow orders," Perrault shot back. "Perhaps you should have attempted to make radio contact before they were within range, then this whole situation could have been avoided. Instead I have to cover this whole mess up!"

"I'd bet a million zollars there'd have been no response. And I've got sixteen dead soldiers to prove as much," Bartlett said, never once breaking eye contact with Perrault. Genette and Hamilton watched the exchange in silence, Genette barely breathing. "All because some trigger happy nutjobs decided to hop across the pond!"

"What happened was an unfortunate training accident as a result of birdstrike and mid-air collisions while in formation. Captain Baker and Lieutenant Stewart's deaths were the result of pilot error," Perrault said pointedly, looking almost bored by their conversation. "That is the official story. Nothing more, nothing less. Your journalist friend here can even attest to that, having witnessed the entire thing."

Genette blinked, the tone of voice he used almost that of a warning. It wasn't a statement or a hidden request, it was an order. One that would likely result in severe punishment should they refuse to follow it. While he understood wanting to keep things under control, it seemed like a disservice to write off their deaths as just an unfortunate accident. Like anyone could buy that birdstrike caused the death of so many people in the blink of an eye. And besides that, while Cape Landers wasn't a highly populated area there was no way that fight didn't catch someone's attention.

It was ridiculous, but he kept his mouth shut. No, he left the protesting to Bartlett, who said enough for both of them. "So that's it, then? The four of us that made it back are just supposed to shut our mouths and let you throw our wingmen under the bus to save face?"

"We're increasing patrols starting tomorrow due to a lack of experience among our pilots, as far as you and what remains of your crew are concerned. The same goes for Mr. Genette, who will be remaining at base for all following sorties," Perrault said, moving on

and making an effort to ignore Bartlett. He sighed. "There's nothing more I have to say to you two. You're dismissed."

"This is gonna come back to bite you in the ass…bastard…" Bartlett said, not bothering to wait for Genette before he made for the door. He didn't seem to care if anyone heard him or not as he left.

Hamilton drew in a breath, giving a look that told Genette he didn't necessarily disagree with Bartlett's comment. His arms crossed behind his back, he gave an almost awkward nod to Genette as he called to both of them, "Good day, Captain. Genette."

"Same to you, sirs," Genette said quietly before he turned to follow Bartlett once more, at a slower, more dejected pace rather than a frustrated one. The situation was clear. Whatever had happened was to be covered up like it had never happened, and Genette's camera was likely not to be returned to him as the only concrete proof anyone had that confirmed the pilots' words. Those people were to be dragged through the mud following their deaths rather than honored, just like Bartlett had said. All to save face.

He didn't bother closing the door behind him, letting it slam shut behind him on his own terms. Right before it closed, he heard Perrault address Hamilton. "Not even an ounce of respect in that man's body. He and your sister are one in the same…if it were up to me they'd be out on their asses long ago."

Although it intrigued him, Genette was never one for eavesdropping. He left it alone, though he would make it a point now to keep his eyes on the remaining pilots, especially the one they called Blaze. She was the same one Hamilton had glared at and had been sent away by Svenson prior to the operation. He wondered what the others, such as Chopper and Blaze, thought of such an obvious coverup. Something told him not many people were going to buy it, but there was nothing that could be done.

As he and Bartlett set off back to the hangars to discard the uncomfortable flight gear still strapped to them, he suddenly had a bad feeling about what was to come. At least Sand Island had offered him that surprise he'd been hoping for.

1600hrs.

The crew ready room was quieter than usual, something that made the absence of their missing wingmates all the more obvious. Natural light poured in from the large window on the wall opposite the door, giving a warm but empty feeling to the room almost. The only conversations were between that of Chopper and his RIO, a woman they called Alto, and whatever scattered conversations could be heard from those passing by in the halls.

Kathryn sat between Hans and Clown near the front of the room, looking to the door every so often as what was left of Bartlett's class of rookie pilots filed in at their own intervals. Otherwise, she just sat there twisting a strand of hair she'd pulled loose from her ponytail. An idle habit of hers she'd had for as long as she could remember.

The three of them had gotten here early, finding Captain Bartlett leaned back in his chair with one leg propped up on the other, just blankly staring up at the ceiling and making no indication he noticed his men entering the room. Lieutenant Cruise stood leaning against the wall at the back of the room, watching everyone with a blank expression and occasionally looking at her pilot with concern.

Off to the corner, by the whiteboard that still had writing from that morning, the journalist Genette sat hunched over with his hands clasped in front of him. He was quite literally twiddling his thumbs, having since changed back into civilian clothes and recovered from the incident after landing. He'd also been here ahead of time with Bartlett, waiting for the others, not saying a word and only looking up when motion by the door caught his eye. Kathryn had been using him as her cue to look over her shoulder, wondering where her roommate was.

Nagase had been a mess when they arrived back at base, saying far less than usual and barely answering Kathryn's questions with more than one or two words. She'd accompanied her back to their room and Nagase had just collapsed onto her bunk, so Kathryn let her get some rest. When she'd gone back to inform her that Bartlett wanted everyone to report to the briefing room she'd found that Nagase had vanished, and she could only assume that she already

knew.

Dogma had arrived not long after Chopper and Alto, taking a seat one row ahead of them beside one of the backseaters that often flew with Hans, Arrow. She wasn't a difficult person to get along with, though not particularly outgoing like Chopper and Clown. Kathryn wondered if the sole reason he chose to sit by her was because not only had she not witnessed the landing earlier that day, but because she was the only person other than Nagase and Alto that didn't make an effort to get on his nerves for being so uptight all the time.

In the corner of the room, Genette lifted his head and straightened his posture, offering a small smile in greeting to the person that entered the room. Kathryn followed his gaze as Nagase quietly stepped through the door, forcing herself to return the gesture, and made a beeline for the empty seat next to Hans. Without a word she sat down, hands in her lap as she stared ahead at the wall behind Bartlett's chair. She had uncomfortably perfect posture as always, the kind that made Kathryn's back hurt just looking at her.

Kathryn leaned over towards Hans so Nagase could hear her, getting her attention as she spoke just above a whisper to her so as not to disturb the others. "Hey, Nagase. Kei," she said, switching to using her first name when she didn't answer to her surname. Once Kathryn had her attention, Nagase slowly looking her way with a curious expression, she went on. "Are you feeling alright? I couldn't find you earlier."

"I'm fine," Nagase said softly, though judging from her expression that seemed the farthest thing from the truth. "I had just gone to the mess hall to grab a bite to eat, and Captain Hamilton asked to speak to me about the sortie, that's all."

"Speaking of, just what happened up there?" Kathryn asked. They'd been told absolutely nothing about the incident, just that it was some accident or something. Judging from the state of Baker's plane before he crashed, though, that didn't sound right at all.

Nagase hesitated, picking at the fabric of her flight suit with her hands as she lowered her head. Barely loud enough for Kathryn to hear her, she answered, "Forget about it, it was just a freak incident.

Nothing we were expecting."

She didn't seem to be in the mood for talking after that, so Kathryn let her be, leaning back in her own seat and glancing at Hans. He'd been listening to the whole thing, obviously, but hadn't interjected. Kathryn whispered to him, "None of this feels right. There's something we aren't being told."

"Yeah, maybe, but there's nothing we can do about it. Just leave it alone," Hans responded, not taking his eyes off the front of the room. He crossed his arms against his chest, adjusting himself in his seat. "Get too nosy and it's just going to cause problems for everyone."

"Be nice if things didn't have to be done that way…" Kathryn mumbled, mainly to herself. She hated being left in the dark and she hated being lied to. Part of the reason was that she could see how badly Nagase, Dogma, and Bartlett had been affected by the entire ordeal and it was just being swept under the rug. Hans was right, though, there was nothing they could do about it. Just keep their mouths shut and do what they were told.

Only a few more moments passed before Bartlett finally sat up with a grunt of effort, uncrossing his legs and leaning over in his seat. He stared at the floor before he looked around the room at all of them. "I know you don't want to hear this after today, but we're short on people. The top brass would rather I didn't say anything, but…"

"Captain?" Cruise spoke up, the expression on her face one of confusion. Kathryn had a feeling she didn't know the full story either, but she probably knew the survivors of the incident were expected to be tight-lipped about it. He nodded to her, and she hesitated for only a moment before she briskly made for the door and softly shut it.

Confused murmurs spread around the room, the only one making an audible reaction being Dogma as he pinched the bridge of his nose and practically growled between gritted teeth, "Oh, for Christ's sake…"

Bartlett ignored him, giving a grateful nod to Cruise before he continued. "There's no way I can properly brief you by lyin' to your

faces, so I'm not gonna bother with that protocol BS," he said, the contempt in his voice obvious. "Unidentified aircraft launched an attack on us today. It wasn't a training accident. Starting tomorrow all you nuggets are gonna be sittin' alert because of this, though as far as anyone is concerned it's just for an increase in patrols or some other stupid excuse. But if we launch, I expect you to stay glued to me up there. You hear me?"

There seemed to be some hesitance, the information he'd just given them a good enough cause for anxiety, the only ones not further affected by the news being the survivors. Kathryn knew there was a reason they kept information like that under cover, she really did, and it was to avoid any panic or further incidents, but if you asked her this sounded like the initial stages of a potential war. You didn't have to be a genius to figure that out, you just had to take a look in any history book. The question was who was picking a fight with Osea and why? Since the Belkan War they hardly had many enemies, and that was fifteen years ago.

Kathryn wondered what they'd do if it actually came to that, but she hoped Nagase had been right about the 'freak incident' thing. Maybe nothing more would come from it, but if it did…her nerves were shot just thinking about it, not that she had much to lose if anything happened to her. Beside her Hans had drawn in a sharp breath, tensing and regularly clenching and unclenching his fist. She wondered what was going through his head, though she could guess just looking at him.

Nearly a minute passed by and no one had said anything, so Kathryn swallowed and decided to take the step everyone else seemed unwilling to. "If that happens, who are you planning to fly with, sir?"

"I was just about to get to that." Bartlett raised his brow, lifting his head slightly. He looked around the room, drawing in a deep breath. Not like he could afford to be very picky with only five pilots left. He raised a hand to his chin almost thoughtfully, then he sharply called out, "Nagase!"

Nagase sat even straighter, if that was possible, taking a deep breath as everyone in the room looked at her now. Her voice was

steady when she responded. "Sir."

"You're flying Number Two on my wing with Dogma, and I expect you to stay on my ass the whole time. Gotta keep an eye on you or who knows what you'll get yourself into…" Bartlett said, a comment that didn't sit well with Nagase. She lifted her head, almost defiantly, and narrowed her eyes as though she took what he'd said as a challenge. If he noticed, he ignored it, moving on to the rest of them. "And speaking of trouble…Chopper and Alto will be flying Number Three, and Blaze and Clown will be taking up the trail position. Don't stray from us if something happens, we'll only have each other to rely on. Grimm and Arrow are gonna hang out here on standby, but that's all we've got."

"Yes, sir," all of them sounded off almost simultaneously, Chopper easily the only person in the room that sounded chipper as he responded.

"Oh, and one other thing," Bartlett said with a sigh, catching Cruise staring him down along with Dogma. He straightened up in his seat. "None of what I told you is to leave this room, do you understand me? You lot aren't goin' down just because I couldn't keep my mouth shut." Once he was satisfied they all were clear on that, he nodded. "Alright, good. Dismissed. Go grab some dinner, get some rest. There's no tellin' what's in store for us."

They all stood up at that, Chopper stretching out his arms and giving an exaggerated groan as he did, as though he'd been sitting there for an eternity. He chuckled, sarcastically remarking to anyone who was listening, "Man, is this gonna be fun or what? We don't even know what's waitin' for us and we're just gonna hop up there and hope for the best. Foolproof plan! No way this could go wrong, right?"

"Hey, at least you're all getting to fly," Arrow remarked with a snort, grabbing her flight jacket from off the back of her chair. Evidently she was somehow cold in a tropical climate, not that Kathryn could blame her. She'd swear the AC was set down below freezing sometimes.

"I don't know, it's just hard to believe Osea might go to war again.

We haven't had problems in years," Hans said, shaking his head. He grew up on the same stories Kathryn did, ones that likely everyone else had heard from different perspectives at some point. "For all we know we're gonna end up in over our heads, but maybe they were just testing the waters? If they got chased off once I doubt they'll come back for more."

"Optimistic one, aren't you?" Dogma almost sneered, though Hans didn't flinch. "Reality is that they could have easily overpowered us and they didn't, which tells me they know they can take us now. You'd have all been better off in ignorant bliss…"

"Hey, take it easy on him, would you? We're all still in shock over this, no point in fighting with each other," Alto said to keep a fight from breaking out. Her voice was quiet and solemn, but she wore a kind smile. "If there's anyone out there waiting for us we deserve to be ready for them."

"Yeah, which means savin' all that anger of yours for the right people," Clown chimed in, smirking as Dogma looked embarrassed by the scolding he was receiving from the others. "Seriously, we're all on the same side. Ain't no use arguin' about it when it changes nothin'. There's an enemy out there and it ain't anyone in this room."

"Clown's right. We just have to do what we can assuming anything happens," Nagase said, the look on her face from earlier still present. She seemed almost agitated, but you'd have never guessed it by how calmly she spoke and moved around.

"Heh, jeez, this is a real fun crowd. Anyways, anyone wanna join me in the mess? I'm starving…" Chopper said, already heading for the door. He let out a scoff as he thought of a dark afterthought. "Hey, who knows, might just be our last meal."

He'd been beside Cruise when he said that, and she reached out and lightly smacked the back of his head like a parent scolding their child. "Knock it off, Davenport. That's not funny and you know it."

"Gah…sorry…" Chopper muttered, wincing and reaching back to rub his head. Sometimes you'd think he was a child. "Ever heard of dark humor as a coping mechanism? Sheesh…"

Alto sighed as she followed him into the hall. "There's a line, Chopper."

Kathryn watched as most of the group left, Genette getting to his feet and bidding farewell to Bartlett before he went to catch up with the others. He and Nagase were the last to leave the room, Cruise leaving her spot at the back of the room to go and speak with Bartlett. Only Clown and Hans remained with Kathryn, evidently waiting on her.

"What do you say we go and grab a bite to eat? You never know, something crazy could happen out there again," Hans said, fidgeting nervously with his hands where he stood. Kathryn wondered if he was worried about her. He'd accepted her stubbornness long ago, but she knew she could worry him at times.

Clown answered first, moving around Kathryn to give him a pat on the shoulder. "Ah, cheer up, Grimm. Nothin'll happen to her up there, not with her crazy luck. I'd be more worried about anyone that wants to pick a fight with us."

Kathryn couldn't help but smile, though admittedly her mind was elsewhere. She wanted to speak with Bartlett. Not allowing her to sortie that morning had been a punishment, though not a result of Bartlett's actions. Something about her brother's words earlier hung in the back of her mind…that her superior wanted her to keep flying, but he didn't know why. Maybe she just wanted some reassurance on the matter, especially with everything that could go wrong tomorrow.

"He's right, Hans, we'll be fine," Kathryn said, though she didn't feel nearly as confident as she probably sounded. She nodded to him and Clown. "You two go catch up with the others. I'll be over in a bit."

"You sure? Is everything okay?" Hans asked her.

"I'm fine, I just want to ask the captain something," Kathryn reassured him, and it was the truth. At that, Clown motioned for him to come along and the two of them left. She waited until they were out in the hall and on their way before she approached Bartlett and

Cruise, never having been intimidated by them but finding herself nervous this time.

Bartlett was speaking to Cruise about something in a low voice, she couldn't really hear what it was but she guessed it might have had something to do with the attack that morning. He stopped once he noticed Kathryn approaching, putting on the expression he always did for his 'nuggets'. Standard 'I don't hate you but we aren't friends' kind of expression, or at least that's the best way Kathryn could think to describe it. If anything, he treated them the same way Pops did, just with a different attitude and approach to it. He and Baker were easily their best instructors.

He cleared his throat, bringing Cruise's attention to Kathryn as well before he asked, "Something the matter?"

Kathryn hesitated, but she took a deep breath and steeled herself all the same. "I wanted to thank you. For letting me fly, I mean."

"Oh, is that all?" Bartlett asked, seemingly confused by it. He gave a short chuckle. "Jeez, forget about it. Not like I have many options, really."

"What I really wanted to know was… *why* , though," Kathryn said quickly, unable to take it back once she said it. He raised an eyebrow, allowing her to elaborate. "Captain Hamilton made it clear I'm a pain in the ass and I screwed up, so why pick me instead of someone like Grimm? What makes you think I could handle a real dogfight?"

Bartlett just stared at her for a long while, his expression softening ever so slightly along with the look in his eyes. He gave a smile, a small one. "You've got potential, that's all. A blind man could see it. You're a good pilot, Kid, and you deserve the chance to prove it."

You're a good pilot, just not a great one . The thought crept up on her and she felt a mix of annoyance and determination all at once, but also fear. Fear that she would crack under pressure or just turn into one major disappointment when all was said and done. But she didn't want to let them see that, so she kept her head and nodded. "I understand, thank you."

"Just…don't make me regret it, alright? I'd like to see your talent and training pay off, so you better stay alive," Bartlett told her, leaning back in his seat. He seemed genuine, no trace of doubt anywhere on his face. He gave her a playful smirk. "Think that's an order you'll be able to follow?"

"I'll do my best, sir," Kathryn said, able to crack another smile in spite of her attempts to keep a poker face.

"Anything else?" Bartlett asked her.

"No, sir, that's all," Kathryn replied, feeling more pressure than she had before but at least now she felt up to the task. She had to be up for it either way, regardless of her own feelings, but at least this way it was a bit easier on her.

"Alright, then get outta here," Bartlett said, nodding to the door. It wasn't in an irritable way, his tone was as playful as the smirk that he still wore.

Kathryn gave a quick nod to both him and Cruise and headed for the door, off to join the others in the mess hall. Hans and Chopper had a point. It may not be their last meal per se, but it could be their last peaceful one. Or maybe there was nothing to be worried about, there wasn't any way they could predict that. But one thing was for sure, she couldn't let anyone down. No matter what they faced, she had to be ready for it.

As she stepped out into the busy hallway, she heard Lieutenant Cruise echo what he'd called her during their conversation. "' *Kid* '?"

Bartlett's response was drowned out by the conversations among passing soldiers, and Kathryn didn't wait around to hear it anyways. At the time she thought nothing of it, content to put it out of her mind as she went about her afternoon.

The Shorebirds

Chapter Two: The Shorebirds

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Sand Island Air Force Base, Ceres Ocean.

***September 24th, 2010* .**

0854hrs.

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They were called in early that morning to report for a briefing, barely having been able to get breakfast in before a voice over the PA system issued the order. They said their goodbyes to Hans and Arrow before they all reluctantly set off out of the mess hall. All eight of them arrived before the base commander, greeted instead by Corporal Philip Cooper, better known in the air as the radio officer aboard their AWACS 'Thunderhead'. Most of the time he wasn't in the air, though, since usually they operated within range of Sand Island's control tower and he just did his work from there.

However, chances are, if they were expected to patrol Cape Landers today after the previous incident then Thunderhead would be joining them. Of course, Kathryn reminded herself to keep her curiosity about the nature of their mission to herself, remembering that Bartlett wasn't supposed to tell them about the attack. He may have been more concerned about them, but she wasn't sure what they'd do without him. He was the only leader they had left, after all.

Everyone chose to keep quiet, except for Chopper who would lean over or forward or back depending on who he wanted to talk to and make hushed conversation after Thunderhead had ordered they 'cut the chatter and be patient'. The only one that did not entertain him after that order was given was Dogma, but that was to be expected. Unfortunately, Kathryn wasn't much better as a conversation partner. After spending much of the evening talking with Nagase in

an attempt to ease their nerves all it really did was make them more nervous, so she was busy trying to focus her thoughts elsewhere. It wasn't working that well.

Bartlett and Cruise sat in the frontmost row of seats, keeping to themselves for the most part. As far as Bartlett's attitude, his mood seemed better but he didn't look like he'd slept very well. Not that they got all that much sleep anyways, but you adjusted to a schedule like that after a while. He looked like he was running on fumes, and he downed what Kathryn was certain was his fourth cup of coffee that morning to prove it.

The door to the room was suddenly slammed close as Perrault arrived, Thunderhead instantly snapping at attention. Everyone moved to get up, but his grating, sour voice boomed out before they were on their feet. "At ease, people! But don't get too comfortable sitting on your asses!"

No one had to be told twice, dropping back into their seats without a word of protest. As Perrault headed to the front of the room, Thunderhead took the time to draw the blinds shut. The morning light streaming in was blocked out, engulfing the room in a depressing sort of darkness as Perrault logged into the blocky laptop on the desk and turned on the almost ancient projector it was hooked up to. From there they watched as said laptop was connected to the military's satellite system, displaying a dark blue map of the world with Osea highlighted in a lighter blue. For just a split second before the focal point was changed with a few swift clicks, Kathryn could have sworn Yuktobania was highlighted in red.

"It's a grave situation for all of us right now," Perrault said, though he didn't sound all that concerned. He took a seat, handing control of the computer off to Thunderhead as he did. "Let's hurry up and get this briefing started."

Thunderhead pinpointed Sand Island on the map off the coast of Osea's southwestern peninsula, clicking Cape Landers as well, the system lagging somewhat as it pulled up the coordinates of the selected locations. "An aircraft of unknown origins has entered Osean Federation airspace. All we've been able to confirm thus far is that the target type appears to be a strategic recon plane flying at

a very high altitude."

He proceeded to further zoom into the peninsula, selecting the area as well as pulling up images from their radar and satellites of the area and aircraft as four arrowheads representing Sand Island's squadron were generated alongside that of the unidentified aircraft. Thunderhead explained, "Despite our repeated warnings, it continued to penetrate our ADEZ and was eventually fired upon automatically by Osean Coastal Defense Force SAMs as a result."

"So what's that got to do with us?" Chopper asked him, crossing his arms. "Sounds like the Coastal Defense took care of it."

"Because we believe one of our SAMs *damaged* the unknown aircraft, but did not destroy it. Our radar shows that it is gradually losing altitude and is attempting to egress feet wet towards the ocean," Thunderhead said quickly, not pleased by the interruption. All that was displayed now was the area of operations terrain and coordinates, as well as the arrowheads and their squadron's roster. "Your orders are to intercept this target and force it to land for identification. Do not fire upon this aircraft under any circumstances. Following its surrender and identification you will standby until further orders are transmitted."

"With the simplicity of the operation, I trust you'll be able to follow your orders to the letter," Perrault said from where he sat, looking over all of them with a scowl on his face. "Whatever you do, let's avoid causing an international incident before we have all of the facts. Dismissed."

Kathryn took a deep breath, Nagase and Clown both tensing on either side of her. They all got to their feet one by one, ready to get in the air. As everyone filed out of the room and into the hallway, Kathryn forced herself to give an awkward laugh. "Looks like a simple intercept. What could go wrong?"

"A lot more than you'd think," Nagase pointed out to her.

"You're gonna jinx us with that attitude, Nagase," Chopper interjected from behind them as he fell in step beside Clown. "Now could both of you *please* not remind me what we could be flying

into? I'd like to stay in denial about all this."

Dogma snorted. "There's clearly a war brewing, no amount of denial will change that."

"Alright, all of you settle down," Bartlett said over his shoulder as they all marched down the hallways. Since he wasn't facing them it was hard to tell what might be going through his head without seeing his expression, but at least for their sake he tried to sound confident. "For now it's all simple and straightforward. No matter what happens up there, we're all gonna come back from it unscathed. And if you don't then you'll be lucky if I don't finish you off myself."

"Yes, sir," all of them called out, Kathryn, Clown, and Chopper being brave enough to let out a few chuckles at his comment. At least he was in a good mood, but that attitude would change when they were in the air and he switched over to his squadron leader mode.

But for now he seemed to be chomping at the bit to get in the air just like the rest of them. Kathryn, in spite of her nerves, allowed herself to feel a little excitement at her first real operation. They were trained to thrive under this kind of pressure after all.

Cape Landers, Osea.

1101hrs.

The four aircraft arrived in the airspace late in the morning, and looking down at the countryside below Kathryn could hardly believe that just yesterday this same area had been the site of a fierce battle. She wondered how Nagase and Dogma were holding up, figuring Bartlett had already bounced back after the events, though it wasn't like any of them had a choice. They would keep their mouths shut and carry out whatever mission was asked of them. Things seemed peaceful enough as they made their approach, though, with no visual on the target yet.

As they closed in on the airspace, Bartlett's voice rang out as he announced their location, calling himself by the personalized callsign

he always used. "This is Heartbreak One of Wardog Squadron, we're entering the area of operations. We should be approaching the target before long."

"This is AWACS, callsign Thunderhead," Thunderhead announced his own designation, not that anyone really needed to hear it again. They all knew who he was, but better to keep things straight Kathryn figured. "Roger, Wardog. Bring the target to the ground, but do not fire at the target. Repeat, do *not* fire at the target. I can't stress that order enough."

"Yeah, yeah, we get it," Lieutenant Cruise said with an irritated sigh, speaking up before Bartlett could. "You act like we weren't at the briefing."

"And *you* act like we weren't fallin' asleep the whole time," Bartlett teased as most of them let out snickers of their own at Thunderhead and Perrault's expense. He quickly went back to business, addressing all of them, "You heard the man, nuggets. Think twice before you all go gettin' trigger-happy on me, alright?"

Nagase was the first to answer, taking a deep breath before she did. "Wardog 2, roger."

"Wardog 3, roger that," Chopper said only a second or two later, almost as an afterthought.

Kathryn didn't think to answer, seeing no purpose in it, so she hesitated and held back. They all knew their orders, she wasn't deaf, there wasn't any point in it. However when she heard Clown clear his throat behind her and Bartlett's voice following a moment later she mentally kicked herself and gritted her teeth as the Captain chose to call her out on it. "Wardog 4, hellooooo? Can you hear me back there, Kid? You better me markin' our tail, girlie, we're counting on you to watch our asses after all."

"Yes, sir, roger that," Kathryn said, then chose the moment to accelerate and pull up, taking care to avoid getting directly behind him. She heard Clown brace himself at the sudden motion. Once she was practically on top of Bartlett, certain she could have rolled over and been close enough to touch him, she casually asked, "Is

this close enough for you, sir?"

"Smartass…" Bartlett said, almost sounding like he was smiling. "You're confident at least, but maybe use your head a little more, hmm? Just don't get separated from me."

"You want me to fly like this the whole time or…?" Kathryn more or less deadpanned, certain she was pushing her luck out there but waiting for them to tell her to back off.

"Very funny. Enough with the dumb stunt, you've made whatever point you wanted to. Just pull back already and wait for orders, would you?" Bartlett asked her, though he didn't sound nearly as annoyed as he probably should have. Maybe Kathryn wanted a reaction, maybe she just liked being a pain in the ass, she really didn't know why she'd done what she did. She was willing to follow his orders, though, easing off and falling back in her position in the formation.

Clown sounded as though he was suppressing an exasperated chuckle as he said, "Maybe do me a favor and take it easy on the crazy crap my first official sortie with ya, huh? I'd really like to go home today."

"Pretty sure she doesn't know how to do that," Dogma piped up, his voice surprisingly void of his usual scorn and holier-than-thou attitude. It wasn't amused in the slightest, either, but she'd take anything at this point.

"Man, am I glad you drew the short straw today instead of *me* ," Chopper said, holding back a laugh of his own. He let out a forced, exaggerated sigh of relief. "Whew, I love flyin' with you, Blaze, you take the heat off me every time. It's nice not to be the Captain's only headache."

"You're enough of a headache for two, trust me," Alto said in an almost grave voice, but they all knew she was joking. In fact, Kathryn nearly snorted at the comment.

"Aren't you a real charmer? When did you decide to turn against me, huh?" Chopper asked in mock offense, as though she wasn't saying

anything he hadn't heard from others a million times over.

"Second Lieutenant Alvin H. Davenport, zip it!" Bartlett snapped at him, interrupting their discussion. Using his full name and rank like a parent using their child's middle name to scold them. Chopper would be in trouble if he didn't watch it, not that Kathryn was in any position to talk. "You need a nickname, too?"

"I respectfully ask to be called 'Chopper', sir," Chopper quickly responded, slipping into the overly formal speech he used when he wanted to get on their superior's good side. However, his tone of voice shifted slightly as he went on, "I'm afraid I may not be able to respond to any other moniker."

"Hmm. Yeah, guess that does fit you well, huh?" Bartlett said slowly, as though they didn't have this argument every so often. He would often Chopper by his rank or name, leading to many corrections such as these. Mostly in the air he was willing to give in to it, but if he started to mouth off he got the full name and rank treatment. "Y'know, I've actually got a better name for you, but I'll keep it to myself. Okay?"

Chopper scoffed, almost sounding as though he was pouting. "Aww, cut me some slack, man. You do this every time I fly with you…"

Before Bartlett could answer, Cruise cut him off from the backseat. "Tally-ho, we've got company out here. Think you boys can knock it off for a minute?"

"Alright, let's get going," Bartlett called out, immediately setting the bickering aside and focusing on their task at hand. Kathryn looked down and sure enough on her display and no doubt on everyone else's the blip had finally appeared on radar, and in the distance she could just make out the dark outline of the aircraft attempting to retreat. As Bartlett banked and throttled up, Kathryn was right behind him, followed by the others. When she'd caught up to him, he called out to her, "Hey, Blaze, ease up. Remember, you're forbidden to fire until I give permission, you understand?"

Kathryn slowed her approach, flying instead on the Captain's wing where Chopper should have been as he instead lagged behind. She

held back a sigh, figuring she should be used to extra precautions with her in the air. "You don't have to keep me on a leash all the time. I understand, sir."

"Good girl," Bartlett praised, though judging from the tone of voice he used it was meant as a joke. It sounded the same way Chopper praised his pet labrador, Kirk, so he must have been poking fun at her after her leash comment. Figures.

"You walked into that one," Clown helpfully commented over her shoulder through a smile, keeping his voice low, and she couldn't help but laugh even at her own expense. He was right, she should have seen it coming.

While the rest of the squadron made a slower approach, keeping their distance, Kathryn wanted a good look at this thing. A Blackbird, an aircraft designed specifically for the purpose of reconnaissance, slowly making its retreat with its cover now blown. The endless farmland below them wasn't of much value to anyone looking to invade, but the facilities that neighbored that farmland on the peninsula were a completely different story. McNealy Air Force Base and the Basset Space Center, though the latter was a bit further along the coast than where they were currently operating.

The aircraft looked unassuming enough, with a standard, sleek black paint job as its name would suggest. Kathryn tried to get as close a look as she could while maintaining a safe distance and without trying to seem confrontational, but it was difficult to see the markings on the aircraft clearly. She could just make out the faintest colors on one of the wingtips, orange and yellow sticking out rather well in spite of their size. There was writing on the opposite wing, likely the air force the aircraft belonged to, but she couldn't see what it said. Only a handful of countries had those colors on their flags, but none of them had any reason for beef with Osea. They couldn't jump to conclusions like that anyways, they just had to wait until they talked their new friend down to the ground and got this mess sorted out.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, Bartlett called out, "Alright, where's Motormouth Chopper?"

"Wha –?" Chopper sputtered out through a breathy laugh, sounding almost startled by it as Alto snickered in the seat behind him. "That's your name for me? I thought you said it was 'better'!"

"You've got a knack for comic dialogue and you never shut up," Bartlett commented, talking slower and with a lower voice. Almost like he wanted to get a rise out of him. "Do you mind sending the surrender request for me?"

Chopper snorted, quick witted as usual with his response, "Oh, nooo, *please* , age before beauty."

"You're no fun! C'mon, consider it a favor," Bartlett said in mock offense. Kathryn and Chopper both had a habit of getting into matches like this with the Captain, and neither of them would let him get the last word in if they could help it. However, unfortunately for them Bartlett was just as stubborn. And he had seniority. Taking on a suddenly sheepish tone, he added, "I'm real shy around strangers, y'know…"

"Is it gonna get me in your good graces?" Chopper asked, though his tone was suspicious.

"Maybe, but you won't know until you try, will ya?" Bartlett said, and Kathryn could just imagine him putting on a sly smirk. It always worked to spur them into action on the ground.

Cruise seemed all around uninterested in the conversation. "With all this back and forth you could have sent the request twice, Jack."

"We'll do it if he won't," Clown volunteered himself and Kathryn before she could have any say in the matter, and she started to open her mouth to argue if not for the fact she almost wanted Bartlett's opinion of her to go up some. Assuming he wasn't just being lazy.

"Alright, enough, I'll do it! Sheesh…testing, testing…" Chopper said, quickly giving in the moment Clown offered up his and Kathryn's services in his place. He could be competitive when he really wanted, though not often. He cleared his throat, speaking now to the pilots of the aircraft in front of them. "Attention, unidentified aircraft,

you're in violation of Osean airspace. Set your course for our beacon immediately."

"Good," Bartlett said, still sounding as though he was smirking. "If all else fails, maybe you can try to annoy them into surrendering."

"Uh…ahem," Chopper said, trying to maintain a formal and diplomatic attitude in spite of Bartlett's joke. It was probably killing him not to be able to throw a comeback at him right away, but he continued without any trouble. "We will then direct you to the nearest airfield for landing. Lower your gear if you understand."

Kathryn braked as the other three caught up, returning to her previous position in the formation as they awaited a response from the aircraft's pilot. The only response was silence on the other end of the line, followed by the aircraft banking to try and keep them off of its tail. Just as it did, Clown's voice broke through the silence right as an alarm sounded through the cockpit, "Heads up, we've got new contacts on radar. Thunderhead, what's it lookin' like up there?"

"Good eye. Warning, all aircraft, we have four high-speed bogeys inbound," Thunderhead quickly confirmed. There was a brief pause, likely as he went over the information as soon as he got it. "Approaching unknown aircraft bearing 280, altitude 6,000. Wardog, hold your fire until further orders are given."

All four of them banked in the opposite direction of the Blackbird, changing course to meet the newcomers head on and readying themselves for a fight if they must. Kathryn could feel her heart rate increase at the sudden warning, but when Bartlett spoke he sounded perfectly calm. As though this was just a minor inconvenience, leading her to wonder just how much of that was for show all for their sakes. "Crossing the border just to provide cover for their spy plane, huh? Well, that's some loyalty to their allies… guess there are some fighter pilots worth their wings out there after all."

"Yeah, but it's bad news for us," Cruise pointed out, and all Bartlett acknowledged her comment with was a brief 'hmm'. She had other concerns, though. "Enemy inbound bearing 280, head on. It looks like they've picked up the pace, so they should be intercepting

soon…"

"So it would seem," Dogma answered her, sounding more anxious than Kathryn had ever heard him. He and Nagase had been so quiet through the entire mission, and Kathryn hadn't even noticed that Nagase had pulled ahead of the formation. "Edge, do you see anything?"

"Yeah. I've got a visual on the unidentified aircraft…well, barely," Nagase replied at a pretty normal speaking level given the circumstances. "They're closing in fast, everyone, keep yourselves alert."

"Nagase, get back on my wing," Bartlett ordered her curtly, and she responded by immediately slowing her aircraft. Once she had fallen back in formation with the rest of them, he went on. "Hold your ground, everyone, we're not gonna get pushed around by these guys. Not if I have anything to say about it. Remember, you aren't to fire until I say it's okay, got me?"

While everyone else had all responded, Kathryn found herself hesitating as her nerves began to get the better of her. If this was her first real fight, she would prefer not to give them a chance to shoot her. She wasn't interested in shooting first and asking questions later, but she also wasn't interested in dying. So, she looked for reassurance where she could. "Captain, are you sure about this?"

To her surprise, Bartlett didn't snap or raise his voice at her. He answered her calmly, doing nothing to add to the stress they were all under. "Don't worry, Kid. Just trust me. No matter what, we're all going home today."

There was that nickname again. He'd only called her that a few times prior to the previous afternoon, usually without thinking about it and rarely, but suddenly he'd taken to using it as though he was making an effort to use it. Still, for the most part he'd succeeded in reassuring her. Obviously, she was still nervous and her heart was still racing as her head threw worst case scenarios at her at a rapid fire pace. But Bartlett swore all of them were going back home, and the least she could do was trust him.

As they all throttled up to meet the unknown aircraft, Kathryn got a visual on four dark specks against the sky just before they were within range. Her HUD picked them up a few moments later, once they were close enough, but they still couldn't tell the aircraft type yet let alone what nation they belonged to. She hoped this would all turn out to be a big misunderstanding, but she knew it was stupid to do so. If it was one then someone must have screwed up big time. For now all they could do was ID the planes in front of them and cross their fingers.

Once they were within range, before anyone could make an attempt to make radio contact, Kathryn's missile alert went off in her ear and all four aircraft broke their formation as several voices shouted out to everyone to evade. She heard Nagase's voice first, "Watch it, missiles inbound!"

Chopper's voice sounded out at almost the same time. "Heads up, they're firing on us!"

"Blaze, move it!" Clown's was the only other voice she could hear clearly through the confused, abrupt chatter, and she didn't need to be told twice. She pulled evasive maneuvers, hoping Clown's order meant he was ready for the ride, and she rolled clear of the missile just in time. The missile warning cut off but she was still being tracked on radar, and she had a good feeling everyone else was as well.

Kathryn could feel herself shaking, whether from fear or anger she wasn't quite sure, but now that their formation was split the hostile fighters had chosen to go after each of them one by one. And while she didn't want to sit back and take it all she could do was try and break their radar lock on her, all four of them occupied with their own maneuvers as the enemy tried to keep them from regrouping. She grunted as the enemy fired on her again, making a dive for the sea and pulling up at the last possible minute to send the missile straight into the ocean.

Catching her breath, the bandit still on her tail, she snapped, "Thunderhead! Are you enjoying the show up there or what?"

Given the situation, she didn't think it was hard to catch her drift.

Unfortunately, it almost seemed that Thunderhead was more worried about the safety of their new enemy than he was about theirs as he quickly responded, "Wardog Squadron, weapons safe! You are not authorized to engage the enemy, stand down and await orders!"

"Oh, come on! Those aren't blanks they're firing out there, you idiot!" Chopper answered, his voice breaking and making him sound more scared than frustrated.

"You expect us to just take this?!" Kathryn asked as she continued trying to shake the fighter on her tail.

"What do we have to do to get you to actually *give us* those orders!" To Kathryn's surprise it was Dogma that said this, usually the most eager to please any and all authority figures, but now he sounded scared and maybe even annoyed. It seemed with his life on the line as well as everyone else's he had other concerns.

"Jack! What are y–" Cruise was cut off when Bartlett finally managed to shake the enemy on his tail, making an abrupt, sharp turn in a different direction.

Once he was free he moved in to support the wingman closest to him, which happened to be Nagase at that moment, jumping on the enemy fighter's six o'clock and forcing it to break off of it's pursuit of Nagase to try and shake his lock. He was just as quick to react, Cruise having caught on to what he was doing and announcing as soon as he was in perfect position to fire. The missile struck the target, the pilot forced to eject as the aircraft fell towards the sea in a ball of smoke and flame.

All of it happened in the blink of an eye. As soon as his missile found its target, Bartlett barked out their new orders, "All of you, shut your mouths and fire back!"

"Captain Bartlett, you are in violation of direct orders!" Thunderhead said quickly, wasting no time trying to get the situation back under his control.

"Shove it, I'm not gonna watch any more of my pilots die!" Bartlett

snarled in response, not wasting his time arguing with their AWACS anymore. "Heartbreak One, engaging!"

"Blaze, engaging!" Kathryn announced, her adrenaline spiking as she threw herself into a proper dogfight. She didn't waste any time, ceasing her evasive maneuvers and increasing her speed as she began to climb, braking abruptly as the enemy fighter moved to follow and putting herself in perfect firing position. Clown called out an order to fire as soon as she had the tone, firing as soon as she heard the order and downing the fighter in the blink of an eye.

Clown gave a victorious cheer, calling out the kill as the enemy pilot ditched his plane. "Whoo, Wardog 4, bandit splashed! Nice one!"

The others were quick to follow suit, Nagase pulling herself together next now that she was free of the bandit on her tail, moving to assist Bartlett as he rounded on the fighter that had been tailing him. As she moved to cover him she called out, "Edge, engaging!"

She worked with Bartlett to corral the aircraft, beating him to the target and taking the kill for herself, getting close enough to use her gun and informing Dogma she was switching over. Her machine gun fire took the wing out, the pilot not having enough time to evade after being so focused on Bartlett's whereabouts over Nagase. He gave her the advantage without even realizing it, but those two knew exactly what they were doing.

Meanwhile, Chopper was having less luck shaking the aircraft that went after him, falling back on the most standard evasive maneuvers in an attempt to shake him. Alto, the one watching their back up there, sounded desperate almost as she warned him, "Chopper, this guy's still on our tail, you need to do something or we're gonna be toast!"

"Gah – you think I don't know that?" Chopper replied, his F-4 easily a match for the enemy's MiG – as they now were close enough to identify – but he'd never been great at shaking targets. Not even during flight school. He was a good pilot, with just as many 'kills' as defeats to boast about, but that was the issue. It was always 50/50 with him, a gamble if Kathryn ever saw one. He grunted as he attempted to pull the same maneuver Kathryn had, but he couldn't

get far enough away for it to work. "Shit, this man is one stubborn bastard!"

"Blaze, we're the closest, probably oughta lend 'em a hand," Clown said, craning his neck to get a better position on their allies. He was absolutely right, they were right there. Bartlett and Nagase moved to offer support, but she'd reach him faster.

"Hang in there, I'm moving to assist!" Kathryn called out, her words partially a warning to Clown as well. She turned towards Chopper's position and throttled up, approaching at an angle that would allow her to at least get the attention of the enemy fighter. Once she did that, the aircraft broke off from Chopper to evade and Kathryn worked to avoid allowing it to return to his six while Chopper regrouped. Although their enemy couldn't hear her, she still spoke under her breath to them, thinking out loud, "Yeah, just keep your eyes on me and we'll go for a ride…"

"Hey, you mind if I grab this kill, Blaze? I probably will anyway, y'know," Chopper said, less a request and more a statement as he came up on the enemy's other side, the two of them tailing the fighter in a way that didn't allow him to fly in any direction without one of them getting into firing position.

"Go for it, I got mine already," Kathryn replied, disengaging to allow Chopper to slide into firing position, speeding up and sticking close in case he needed her support. He did just fine, taking the chance as soon as he got it and firing, splashing the bandit without any trouble once he'd gotten the upper hand. Kathryn couldn't help but smile. "That makes one for each of us!"

"Good, nicely done, nuggets! You're doing good," Bartlett called out through a tired breath. "How are things lookin' back there, Dagger?"

The use of Lieutenant Cruise's callsign was rare, the two of them usually referring to one another on a first name basis. It appeared in the heat of battle he did it without thinking about it. Kathryn knew they had served together since the Belkan War, so maybe an actual fight brought him back to that time. She didn't really think anything of it as Cruise told him, "You guys might be getting another serving… got contacts on radar, looks like we've got four more inbound."

"Heh, how about that? Four against four…at least they're keeping things fair," Bartlett said with a short laugh.

"Wait, hold that thought," Cruise said quickly, her tone shifting slightly. She suddenly let out a sigh. "Wonderful. Scratch what I said, it's looking like eight."

"Damn, we jinxed it," Alto cursed, sounding genuinely disappointed and worried by the fact. "This isn't looking like our day, is it?"

" *We* didn't jinx anythin', the Captain did," Clown told her with an almost annoyed huff.

"I'm moving to intercept, I want these guys gone already," Kathryn said, banking and turning in the direction of the new groups of enemies. They'd be within range before long.

As she did this, Thunderhead cut in once more, sounding outright furious with them. "Negative, Wardog 4, maintain weapons safe and hold your position! Regroup and follow your previous orders, you are not given permission to engage!"

"We're outnumbered. The chances we make it through a fight like this is low," Dogma pointed out, almost sounding hesitant to voice his opinion. That wasn't like him. "If we're expected to fight we'd need more men on our side. Just stand down, this isn't going to end well."

Nagase didn't address him, speaking instead to Bartlett for some answer on what to do and who to listen to. "Captain? We don't have much longer to make a decision."

Kathryn could feel anger forming a knot in her throat, whether as a result of Thunderhead's insistence they stand down or her frustration at their enemy. She maintained her course, staying as calm as she could as she added, "I'm not going to stand by and let them kill us. We didn't start this fight, but we can sure as hell end it."

Bartlett didn't answer right away, but eventually he throttled up and turned towards Kathryn, who slowed as he approached to allow him to take the lead. Nagase followed just as he had told her to in the

briefing, taking up the position opposite Kathryn. Bartlett, to Kathryn, sounded determined as he said, "Let's go. We're gonna shoot them all down, Kid. The rest of you, hang on!"

"Dammit, this isn't how I wanted to spend my morning," Chopper grumbled, having no choice but to follow them. No matter what they did it would be seen as a violation of orders. They could fight and go home by disobeying Thunderhead or they could turn and run by disobeying Bartlett, and neither option would guarantee survival. If they went down they may as well put up a fight. Almost dramatically, he let out a sigh, "If anything happens to me, let it be known that my only regret…is not being able to fly with a captain with a sunnier disposition."

"Y'know, you don't see it now but someday you're gonna be glad you flew with me," Bartlett said, though he sounded amused. He got no response from Chopper, which was rare, but he didn't antagonize him further. They had more pressing matters, given they were now within visual range of the enemy backup.

The four of them intercepted the eight enemy fighters head on, one of the flights of four at the same altitude as them, directly in their sights. Once within range they got a lock on them one by one, firing simultaneously without even meaning to, Kathryn and Bartlett's missiles taking out the lead plane and his wingman while the other two just narrowly missed their shots. As the two aircraft went down, Chopper let out a short whistle as he rounded on the plane he'd missed, Nagase doing the same. Kathryn climbed to chase after the other aircraft as they circled back around, Bartlett right behind her.

Nagase downed the fighter she'd missed previously, getting on its tail and getting another chance to fire. She immediately pulled her nose up to climb up and support the two of them, right as Kathryn broke off one of the planes in the formation. Nagase was right beside her, working with her the same way Chopper had to chase the enemy down. Kathryn got a lock on first, firing a missile but missing as the fighter released flares and rolled off to the side. She spat to herself and heard Clown groan behind her before she switched to her guns, Nagase having already broken off assuming the enemy would have gone down with that hit.

Closer to the ocean, Chopper used his machine gun to finish off his original target and quickly moved to assist Nagase and Bartlett, getting the enemy's attention without meaning to. One of them managed to split him off from Bartlett so it was a one-on-one match, and Chopper loudly groaned as he almost didn't manage to evade an incoming missile. The g-force was putting a strain on everyone, though he seemed especially affected by it. Still, they all had to grit their teeth and put up with it. They could rest once they were all safe.

At last he managed to shake the fighter, circling around just as the fighter did the same, the two of them going nose to nose. He fired as soon as he had a lock, Alto announcing him of the enemy's lock on him as warnings blared in the background. The enemy disappeared from radar as Chopper's missile connected, right before their guest had time to fire on him. He let out another groan, sounding out of breath. "Dogfighting sucks, man…my nerves are shot. I don't even have time to be afraid!"

"Speak for yourself, I'm barely hanging on back here," Alto said, sounding equally out of breath. Maybe even a little sick, but she was holding herself together. Her tone completely shifted as she took notice of one of the enemy wingmen on their tail. "Oh, for the love of! Chopper, shake this guy off!"

"Whoah!" Chopper evaded at the last possible second. "Damn, these guys are really mad now!"

Kathryn wasn't able to keep tabs on them for much longer, dead focused on the target in front of her. Everything else seemed to close in around her as if all that was left in the world was that fighter, and she started to wonder if it was tunnel vision or what was going on. Maybe it just seemed like that as a result of staring at the target on her HUD like her life depended on it. Technically, it very well could. The guy was pulling some tough maneuvers, but she thought she was keeping up with him just fine. *Just a little further…almost there…almost…got you.*

"You're in gun range, scrap 'im, Blaze!" Clown called out to her, snapping her out of whatever state she'd been drifting into.

"Firing!" Kathryn said aloud without thinking, sparing only a second to make sure her shot was still lined up before she took it, her grip tightening as she pulled the trigger. The faint sound of the gun could be heard from the cockpit as she fired, the shots shredding the engine of the enemy fighter. She broke off, certain he couldn't recover from it, and a few moments later the aircraft crashed into the ocean. She didn't know if the pilot ejected or not, she just knew the aircraft disappeared from her radar.

"Wardog 4, bandit down…" Thunderhead announced, grumbling the words out. Clearly he wasn't pleased by it, but he also still had a job to do. He'd been more or less silent this entire time, clearly knowing he was wasting his breath by trying to order them not to fire. There was no stopping them now, not until the enemy was chased off. "One unidentified fighter moving to exit airspace."

"Aww, what a shame. Too tired to party?" Bartlett asked with a snort at his own comment.

Kathryn jerked her head around, trying to get a view on all of her allies. Bartlett, together with Chopper, had taken on the enemy plane that jumped on Chopper following its wingman's death. Bartlett got in the finishing blow, splashing the bandit with one quick missile hit. The pilot couldn't recover the aircraft, punching out not long after. Nagase, along with the last remaining enemy fighter, had vanished but were still showing up on radar. It seemed that she had started to pursue and unknowingly she was just interfering with his retreat. It wasn't like her, never one to fight unless she absolutely must. A retreating plane wasn't the kind of target she went after.

"Nagase, Nagase, didn't anyone ever teach you not to get strung out so far pursuin' an enemy?" Bartlett asked, almost exasperated. No response came, not that she was very talkative, and his tone was a little harsher as he added, "Alright, the show's over Nagase, it's time to bring it back."

"Nagase!" Dogma's voice followed, an irritated snap suddenly bringing her back to the present it seemed. Not before the last remaining enemy disappeared from radar.

"Huh? I mean, Wardog 2, bandit splashed," Nagase said, sounding

out of breath and startled with her response. No one else seemed to think anything of it, and Kathryn wasn't about to say anything. It wasn't until she realized how far out she was that she understood she'd chased down a retreating enemy. "I…shoot, I completely zoned out…if I knew he was withdrawing I wouldn't have –"

"Relax, it doesn't matter. The aircraft was still combat capable. He was bailing on his wingmen," Bartlett said to ease her conscience, though how effective it actually was remained to be seen. She said nothing as she slowly made her way back to them, Kathryn and Chopper returning to their previous positions. Bartlett didn't think anything else of it as she returned, moving on quickly enough. "Thunderhead, we got clear skies down here or what?"

"All unidentified aircraft destroyed. Everything is clear," Thunderhead replied, maintaining his composure but Kathryn knew he was just trying to keep things professional. He took a deep breath. "Wardog Squadron, RTB."

"Hmph, good. Everyone, this is your captain speaking," Bartlett addressed them now, ignoring how curt Thunderhead was being. He obviously wasn't concerned. All of them were alive, and Kathryn would consider that a success. He probably did, too. "Are you all alive? Good. Nice work, nuggets. Wardog 4, you still following us? You can all hear my voice?"

"Nope, sorry. Not a word," Kathryn said sarcastically before anyone else could sound off, earning a laugh from Clown in the backseat in the process. Chopper and Alto quickly joined in. While it probably wasn't the best time, she couldn't resist.

"Hey, perfect, that means you can hear me!" Bartlett responded, taking the remark in stride and maybe even sounding amused by it. She half-expected another retort to follow, but to her surprise he instead told her, "Well…to commemorate the fact we all made it out of that battle, I'm gonna let you keep your nickname. I think you've earned it. So from now on, I'm gonna call you 'Kid', no matter what. Got it? Good."

He didn't wait for her to answer, leaving her caught off guard and even a little confused. Kathryn wasn't sure how to answer, and she

wasn't sure of the origin. She'd heard Pops call Bartlett that once or twice, but never exclusively, making her wonder if there was something she wasn't being let in on. But she'd clearly earned the Captain's approval, so who was she to complain? She smirked. "Guess I couldn't stop you even if I wanted to."

"Smart girl," Cruise answered for him, sounding as though she might have been smiling as well. Whatever the case, they were all too tired and relieved to still be alive to care about arguing anyways.

"Well, then, Kid, whaddya know? You must have done good out here," Clown said with a light, breathy chuckle. "I mean, gettin' praise from Bartlett *and* Cruise? That's a miracle by itself."

As their formation of four changed course to return to Sand Island, Chopper muttered under his breath, "Man, I swear…"

Whether he was expressing his frustration about the battle they'd been through or about their captain, Kathryn didn't know. As she was coming off her adrenaline high, she was just happy she was still alive to go home, and she had a feeling the same could be said for the others, too. The day dragged on as they flew home, left to wonder if they could rest easy or if this was just the start of their trouble.

Sand Island Air Force Base, Ceres Ocean.

1500hrs.

They returned to base, arriving at the briefing room after tending to their flight gear. Kathryn couldn't speak for the others, but the second that harness was off of her it brought about instant relief, though her body still ached from the fight. She wanted nothing more than to go to bed, though practically she knew there was still plenty more to be done before she could call it a day. At the very least, she was glad when they finally entered the briefing room and she was able to drop into one of the chairs there, her legs practically giving out underneath her. The others were quick to do the same.

One thing she noticed was how quiet the room was, the computer logged in even though neither Perrault nor her brother were there to operate it. Thunderhead was the only person there, having arrived long before them. He looked up at them all as they entered the room, his expression blank but his eyes giving away his annoyance. As they all took their seats he turned to the computer, crossing his arms as he put something in, telling them without looking back at them, "We received an emergency transmission from Central."

That was all he said to them before leaving the screen to relay the message for him:

To all Sand Island Air Force Base personnel:

1. All information regarding today's hostile encounter is to be classified. Under no circumstances are you to divulge the events to unauthorized personnel.

2. Captain Jack Bartlett is ordered to report to base headquarters and Lieutenant Colonel Perrault's office immediately.

They all turned to look at the Captain, watching him suck in a sharp breath and force himself to his feet, not bothering to protest or say anything about it. It was something that was familiar to Kathryn, having had the same reaction after being sent to speak with Allen. Once you've been reprimanded so many times you stop protesting, you just shut your mouth and take it up with the ones in charge instead of shooting the messenger.

While Thunderhead was a pain on the best of days, he was just relaying their orders to them. He wasn't exactly the one making them, nine times out of ten. That didn't make him any less of a pain but it did make it easier to tolerate him on the ground. He said nothing as he straightened up, having quickly shut everything down. He turned around just in time to see Bartlett exit the room, looking them all over before he did the same, the two of them heading in completely opposite directions.

Everyone else was left sitting in complete, awkward silence, unsure what to do. They were as good as dismissed, but after everything that had happened their return to base felt a little anticlimactic. Not

that they were expecting some hero's return, but after tangling with so many fighters you'd think someone would acknowledge that something wasn't right. Chopper was the first to break the silence, echoing her thoughts, "Soooo…that's it, then? We don't even get a thank you?"

"We weren't supposed to engage them," Dogma pointed out, resting his head against his fist. He closed his eyes. "We're lucky enough that we're not the ones being reprimanded."

"Everyone else around here seems to know what's going on. Did nobody else see the way everyone was looking at us?" Alto observed, having noticed the looks everyone was giving them on the way over. Kathryn had noticed it, too, but she hadn't thought anything of it in the moment. "We're the only ones in the know about whatever is going on. You'd think they could at least address it."

"You see, that's exactly the issue," Cruise pointed out to her, turning around, looking over each and every one of them. "We're in the know but almost nobody even knows what the hell is going on. Those MiGs that engaged couldn't even be ID'd properly, not right away. If they go over our gun cam footage they'll be lucky if they got a clear look at them. But…just based on their liveries…"

Cruise trailed off, and Kathryn decided to fill in the blanks for them. There was only one country she could think of that could have those colors and have any kind of potential Osean connection. "The roundel I saw on the Blackbird looked Yuktobanian," she said, and everyone looked her way. "We've been allies for years, though. It doesn't make any sense."

"You're right, Kid, it doesn't," Clown said with a sigh, having quickly picked up her new nickname in just a few hours. "But what are we supposed to do about it?"

"Nothing. There's not a damn thing we *can* do," Cruise said, abruptly getting to her feet and heading for the door at a brisk pace. She exited the room, disappearing from view as she turned the corner in the same direction Bartlett had headed. Straight for the base commander's office. It seemed that the Yuktobania thought had crossed her mind, but something about Kathryn saying it out loud

seemed to really get under her skin.

All of them sat there, unsure what to say after that. Once again it was Chopper that broke the silence, grunting as he rose to his feet. "Well, enough of that. I need to take Kirk out. Anyone up for a walk?"

"Not a chance. I'm ready for a nap," Dogma said, immediately declining and getting up from his own chair.

Nagase looked over at him as he headed for the door. She looked concerned, probably worried she'd overdone it earlier during the operation. "Are you sure?"

"Positive, you guys are exhausting," Dogma said, though not in his usual insulting way. In fact, with how pale he'd looked when they landed, Kathryn almost felt bad for him but she kept that to herself. As an afterthought before he left, he monotonously said to Nagase, "I'll see you around. Have fun."

"Well, guess he's taking that stick with him, too," Chopper remarked once he was out of earshot, not that he ever cared who heard him. Kathryn felt bad for how hard she snorted at the comment, trying to suppress a laugh. Everyone but Nagase was grinning, though she almost smiled. Chopper went on once he was satisfied with the response. "Well, I better go get him. If anyone else wants to join us just bring some sodas or something, we can call it an after sortie celebration or something."

Kirk's 'walks' could often become something of an event, because usually it just involved hanging out on the tarmac or in the hangars and playing lengthy games of fetch or keep-away depending on what mood Kirk was in that day. After the first week or so, you could pretty much see everything Sand Island had to offer, and so pacing the base became very dull. But when you have a dog that needs exercising and to use the bathroom you have to make do. As a result, Chopper was usually more than happy for any additional company. Kirk was, too, being a very sweet dog that was unfortunately confined to Chopper's quarters more often than not.

All of them acknowledged they'd heard what he said as he left, setting off for the crew quarters to go and get Kirk. The four of them

that remained all had already decided what to do, anyways, and he probably knew that. Kathryn never missed the opportunity, loving animals too much to pass up a chance to pet a dog. Or exist around one. She missed her own pets, all left behind in her father's care in North Osea, and Kirk reminded her of one of the dogs they owned in her childhood. It was bittersweet if she thought about it too much, so she tried not to.

Alto and Clown were usually hit or miss on whether they'd join them on these walks, but today they both seemed in agreement. Clown stood up first, stretching out briefly until his back crunched before he said, "Well, guess I'll go 'n grab us some drinks."

"Do you need a hand?" Alto asked, not waiting for an answer before she got to her feet. She was about as considerate as Hans, always looking to help out in the most miniscule ways she could. One of the many reasons she was so well-liked. The two of them set off together, with Alto calling to Kathryn and Nagase, "We'll meet you guys at the hangars!"

They left, talking about something, though Kathryn had zoned their conversation out, looking instead to where Nagase sat staring straight ahead. She looked around, making sure they were alone before she said anything, but once she was certain of that she didn't hesitate. "What happened to you today?"

"Pardon?" Nagase furrowed her brow, looking over at her. She was one of the only people that Kathryn knew that answered a question she didn't understand or like that way, as opposed to a simple 'what'.

"I mean you chasing down that fighter like that. It wasn't your style," Kathryn said, keeping her voice low so no one passing by could hear her. "It was like you couldn't even shake your focus. Did you even hear Bartlett tell you to come back?"

Nagase was quiet for a few seconds, her face blank. Kathryn was just worried for her, and she was certain Nagase knew that. The look in her eyes wasn't anger, it was something else. Like the fear in her eyes after she came back yesterday. At last she took a deep breath and pulled herself together enough to answer. "I got caught

up in the moment, that's all. Besides, you heard the Captain. That pilot was bailing on his allies…and anyways, he ejected."

"That battle didn't seem to sit well with you. It was like you were a ghost up there," Kathryn said, using the first comparison that came to mind. She'd been so quiet, which at first wasn't unusual, but half the time they were up there Kathryn hardly even knew she was there.

"I'm fine, I promise. All of this just…had me a little shaken up," Nagase said quickly, getting to her feet before Kathryn could press the issue. "Look, we're back alive and that's good enough for me. I'm going to go grab my book, alright?"

Kathryn didn't bother asking her if she'd be joining them as she hurried to their quarters to get her book. An old, worn copy of a children's novel, *A Blue Dove for the Princess* , that she almost always had her nose buried in during her free time. Either writing or reading, all Kathryn knew was that she treasured that thing and was trying to fill in the blanks where pages had fallen out. It was a lovely story, albeit dark for a kid's book. Kathryn remembered liking it once upon a time, though it was never as near to her heart as it was to Nagase's. They'd been able to bond over it at Heierlark when Kathryn was able to help her with some of the missing passages.

In any case, Kathryn guessed Nagase wouldn't be going out there with them. And if she was, she wouldn't be in any mood for a conversation. More likely she would be retreating to their room or to the crew room to be left in peace, to read and write and destress. Kathryn couldn't fault her for that, reaching her own limits and crossing dangerously into 'autopilot mode' as her family often called it. She could tolerate so much activity and conversation before she got overwhelmed by even the slightest thing, but the fresh air usually did her some good. Figuring Nagase was similarly overwhelmed, Kathryn was content to leave her alone. It was probably best for the both of them.

Left with nothing but an empty room, Kathryn sighed and followed after the others, shutting the door to the briefing room behind her as she stepped into the hall. No sooner did she do that before she heard Hans' voice over the idle chatter in the halls and looked up to

see him hurriedly heading towards her, carefully evading various other base personnel on his way, a look of concern on her face she hadn't seen since the disaster that earned her her callsign. "Kathryn!"

She walked towards him, saving him the trouble of jogging a few extra feet, stopping as soon as they reached each other. He almost looked like as much of a mess as the rest of them did. "Hey, is everything alright?"

"Things spread fast around here. I heard about the dogfight from Pops," Hans answered, giving her a look as though it should have been obvious. He must have run all the way from the hangars, which would explain the state he was in. Though he kept his hair cut short, a few auburn strands clung to his forehead courtesy of his sweat. "You're all okay, right?"

"Spectacular," Kathryn answered flatly, recalling the debrief. If you could call it that. Hans gave her a confused look and she shrugged. She started walking towards the door, Hans following her quickly, and she continued. "It depends on your perspective. We're fine, we won the fight, it's just that…I don't know, something just isn't right. And I don't just mean armed fighters penetrating our airspace."

"Did you figure out who it was or no?" Hans asked her as they walked.

Kathryn shook her head. Even if they had a prime suspect, they couldn't jump to any conclusions. She waited until they stepped outside before she gave him a proper answer, taking a deep breath at the sudden shift in temperature. "Nope. Just some markings that probably aren't enough to go off of. It looked like Yuktobanian aircraft, but there's nothing concrete."

"Why would Yuktobania have any reason to spy on us? Let alone open fire on our aircraft?" Hans asked. While Yuktobania and Osea had been locked in a Cold War for some time, as soon as the Belkan War broke out they were willing to fight on the same side. It didn't make sense for either of them to turn on each other now.

"That's what none of us can figure out. And it's probably why we've

been told to keep our mouths shut about it," Kathryn said, though she didn't think Hans was someone she needed to keep information from. She told him almost everything and he'd never betrayed her trust. A group of seagulls on the sidewalk cried out and took to the air as the two of them approached. "Everything about this is too weird. I can't shake the feeling that we have no idea what we've started."

"Maybe what happened today was enough to scare them off?" Hans suggested, though his voice wavered slightly in spite of himself. Kathryn didn't answer right away, lost in her own thoughts. She wanted to believe him, but her instincts told her otherwise. When she didn't answer, he brushed his fingers over the back of her hand to get her attention. "Kathryn?"

The gesture was one she was used to, but it caused a chill to rush over her. Most likely a lingering effect from the battle. She answered him, giving him a small, reassuring smile when she noticed how worried he looked, though not fully convinced things were as simple as he said. "Yeah, maybe you're right."

Hans was quiet for a few moments, looking over her face with an expression that told her he saw right through her. If he did, he didn't directly say it. Instead, he said, "If something like this happens again, though, promise me you're going to be careful."

Kathryn was about to answer him, but the sound of Chopper shouting at her cut her off, turning in time to see him flinging Kirk's frisbee towards her. "Hey, Kid! Heads up!"

She caught it on instinct, a few seconds later nearly knocked off balance as Kirk came barreling towards her, barking excitedly and launching himself towards the frisbee she now held. Kathryn was quick to recover, though the breath was knocked out of her, and she couldn't help but smile as Kirk now stood in place, looking up at her and barking as though he was demanding she throw the frisbee for him. Instantly, she switched to baby-talk to address the dog. "Do you want this? Huh? Is that what you want?"

Kirk fell into a play bow, still barking with his tail wagging. Kathryn turned and tossed the frisbee as hard and as far as she could, all of

them watching as Kirk immediately took off after it, seemingly calculating his approach so he could catch it out of the air. He succeeded, leaping up and catching it with ease, trotting around as if to show off his victory before he jogged back towards them.

As Clown and Alto passed out sodas they'd gotten from the mess hall to everyone and Chopper broke into a dramatic retelling of the events of the operation to tell Hans what he'd been missing, Kathryn was almost able to let go of her worries even if just for a moment. But the feeling was a nagging one, and lively conversation wasn't enough to shake it. It almost felt like the peace Osea had maintained for all these years was about to fall apart. And all she could do was pray that whatever may be waiting for them in the future would be resolved quickly.

Disquiet

Chapter Three: Disquiet

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Sand Island Air Force Base, Ceres Ocean.

***September 24th, 2010* .**

1600hrs.

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Genette watched from the sidelines as the group of pilots all played with Chopper's dog, Kirk. One of them, usually Chopper, would throw the frisbee and when Kirk gave chase the others would try and take it from him. Often as a result of him wanting it thrown again but refusing to give it up. Genette had been invited by Chopper to join the games, but it wasn't exactly his speed. He'd accompanied them out there, though, and the woman called Alto was nice enough to offer him a soda even if he didn't join in.

They were all a rather unique group, and he enjoyed watching them have a good time around each other. Even in spite of what had happened. Chopper had been tight-lipped about the whole thing, evading the question and jumping from one topic to the next at a rapid fire pace in hopes Genette would forget about it. Somehow, in just an hour or so since the squadron returned, the only word he'd heard in passing was that they came across a UFO. It fit the bill for the most part, if you used a broader definition of 'unidentified' from his understanding.

He took a sip from his soda as he observed the scene before him from a bench set up just outside the hangar doors, the mechanic they all referred to as 'Pops' working on a transport plane inside. Genette would have liked to be properly working, able to take footage and photographs, but without his camera that was impossible. So instead he jotted down a few things in a notebook

that they'd yet to take from him. It wasn't small, but it was able to fit into the inner pockets of his vest, so unless they were monitoring him at all times he doubted they'd go so far as to snatch it from him.

As he set his drink down and opened it up, ready to start scribbling some thoughts down for later – assuming he was even allowed to do the piece he'd come here for – Pops' voice echoed out in the hangar behind him. "Y'know, if they catch you with that you're probably gonna have hell to pay."

Genette nearly jumped out of his skin at the comment, already paranoid about potential consequences. He settled down once his brain registered there was no threat of an MP or senior officer there. "You're probably right…then again, I could just say it's my diary," he said, only half-joking. "It's not like anyone can read my handwriting but me."

"You write for a living and you don't have neat handwriting? There's some irony for you," Pops said with a light chuckle. "Then again, I guess computers make it easier on you, huh?"

"You have no idea. I don't know how I ever made it without one," Genette said. Every comment on his handwriting, even his own embarrassment over it, just made him all the more happier he hadn't been born in the Dark Ages. His infinite curiosity and ideas would have had absolutely no constructive outlet were that the case. He tapped the end of his pen lightly at the top of the page, then flipped it closed. "Anyways. It's not like most of it will do me any good. If the military has their way, then the story I'm after won't ever happen. So, it doesn't matter what I write down."

"Ah, I wouldn't worry about it too much," Pops said, having barely glanced his way during the whole exchange, keeping his hands busy as he tinkered with something on the transport plane he flew. "Before you know it this whole mess'll be settled, you'll get your story, and you can go home in no time. If we're being optimistic at this point…though between you and me, nothing in this world has ever been *that* easy."

"A quick look at history could tell anyone that much," Genette responded, turning his own attention back to the soldiers and dog

racing about the runway before him. It was almost enough to take his mind off the current situation. Almost.

"Smart young man," Pops complimented with a light laugh. Despite his words and everything going on around him, he'd been remaining upbeat this entire time, seemingly unbothered by things occurring around him. Genette wondered if it could be a facade, but he didn't yet know him well enough to say. "In any case, keep your chin up. If the last couple of days have proven anything at all, it's that you never know what could happen."

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind. Thanks," Genette said genuinely. It gave him something to think about, and so long as the gears in his head were turning he'd be just fine without an actual job to do. For now, anyways, he'd be far too restless before long if something didn't give. Maybe even enough to consider playing fetch with Kirk like the others. But until he reached that point, he was content to observe, and to better understand the people he was stuck with.

Only a few more minutes passed by, during which a few of the pilots dropped to the ground to rest for a while after a lengthy game of chase with Kirk when he decided to go sprinting down the length of the runway so they wouldn't take the frisbee from him. Chopper returned to the others with Kirk slung over his shoulder like a sack of flour, strangely alright with being carried in such a manner. He still refused to give up the frisbee, not even when Chopper finally set him back on the ground and he went hopping away a few steps, waiting for the game to continue.

Genette's attention was pulled away from the scene by Bartlett and Cruise's arrival, the two of them marching towards the hangar, in vastly different moods. Cruise was frowning, though it bordered on an irritated scowl, while Bartlett was smirking as if he'd just won some kind of argument. At first Genette wondered if there was conflict between the two of them somehow, but as they approached and were finally within earshot he found that wasn't the case at all. Not based on the end of their conversation that he caught.

"...pretty sure if you weren't the only instructor left Perrault would have shot you," Cruise said, looking truly exasperated by him. Bartlett was stifling a laugh, waving her off, but that didn't silence

her. "I hate these guys, too, but you don't have to kiss their ass to stay out of trouble."

"You were makin' just as many smartass comments as I was," Bartlett quickly pointed out with a shake of his head. "Besides, all I did was state my opinion. Nothin' wrong with that."

Cruise crossed her arms, stopping a few feet from where Genette sat while Bartlett kept walking, not looking back at her. She huffed. "*My* smart ass comments were only meant to be heard by *you* . Next time you get onto your nuggets for being disrespectful, I'm going to remind you of what you said," she told him. Then she adopted a poor mockery of his voice, "'All I did was state my opinion'."

The Captain chose to ignore her, laughing the exchange off. Cruise was quick to forgive, not that she was too upset to begin with, leaving the matter alone. Maybe she was just happy she got the last word in. Watching the two of them, it was hard to imagine there was any difference in their rank. They treated each other like equals, and apparently – based on what Cruise had said – liked to badmouth their superiors behind their backs. Well, Bartlett was more forward with that badmouthing than Cruise was.

Genette watched as Bartlett and Cruise both silently greeted Pops, who seemed amused by the whole exchange. While Genette was curious, he didn't outright ask them what they were talking about, wanting to know more than just that. He knew the Captain had been brought in to speak with the superiors, apparently about the alleged unsanctioned dogfight. He didn't want to press it if they didn't want to discuss it, though, so he tried a subtle approach. "So, how did everything go with you two?"

"They chewed his ass out for engaging without permission," Cruise said nonchalantly, taking a seat at the opposite end of the bench Genette sat on. She leaned forward, cupping her face in her hands. She seemed exhausted. "I got roped into it, but I wasn't there for that."

"What *were* you there for?" Genette asked.

"Call it emotional support," Cruise answered with a short chuckle.

"I didn't need backup, though your concern is touching. Honestly, the whole thing was just a bunch of posturing. That and they're ticked off because I didn't let my pilots die just to avoid anyone thinking something might be wrong out here," Bartlett said, pacing a few short steps each way, seemingly restless, before he finally stopped. He placed his hands behind his back, watching some of his trainees as they enjoyed the late afternoon sun. Only Chopper and Kirk were still in the game, the others having dropped to the ground to sit. Bartlett didn't look away from them as he spoke, smiling softly. "Honestly, why do they even bother reprimanding me? I know I'm gonna be stuck at Captain forever, I don't need to be reminded. Just like they know I'm never gonna be able to follow orders to their satisfaction. Waste of everyone's time if you ask me."

"When you consider it's a matter of security, it makes a little more sense. Though it's still stupid. You do your job, people get mad. You don't, people die. And get mad," Cruise said, sounding as though she'd already had this conversation with him. At the very least, she humored him. "Damned if you do, damned if you don't. It wouldn't matter either way, anyone in that area would have seen what happened. Civilians aren't nearly as stupid as the military likes to pretend."

Genette lowered his gaze somewhat, keeping his head up but his eyes on the pavement below, holding his hands in front of him. He ran his fingers along the back of his hand, trying to find a good way to question them. It was a pretty sensitive subject, but at the same time he didn't like being left in the dark. If they were going to force him to stay there because of what he knew, he may as well actually know something. "Why do you think they're covering up the battle? We may still be at peace officially but…it feels pretty fragile."

"Listen…" Bartlett said, taking a deep breath, and Genette tilted his head towards him, watching him out of the corner of his eye. "The only thing waiting across that ocean is Murska Air Base. That's Yuktobanian territory."

Genette considered that for a minute. He didn't say something directly, but the implications in his answer were clear enough. From the direction the enemy came and the direction they'd retreated, it lined up. At least as far as Genette could tell. Even so, it was a bold

accusation. Especially given Osea and Yuktobania's current relationship. "But haven't we been allies with the Yukes since the war fifteen years ago?"

"Yup, and that's exactly the issue," Cruise said, straightening up, clapping her hands on her knees. She began to explain, "We've seen nothing but MiGs, and while they aren't the only country that uses them they've got an awful lot of them. It's one of the two aircraft series their manufacturers helped produce with North Osea's company. They pioneered them. Then there's the livery on that reconnaissance craft, the direction. Just one too many 'coincidences'…"

"Yeah. That's why we've got people working their asses off trying to confirm what the hell's going on over there," Bartlett added, keeping a faint smile, but he sounded almost reluctant to agree. He lowered his head, staring down at their shadows for a few moments while he spoke. Then he lifted his head towards the sunset again, sighing. "I bet they've got hotlines ringin' off the hook somewhere upstairs. The government doesn't want to get the public too riled up with all of this, y'know?"

"There'd be instant outrage if it got out. Both countries would be at each other's throats whether there was actually a war brewing between them or not," Cruise said, glancing up at him. It was like she kept looking for a specific reaction from him. Not because she was fishing for it but because she was expecting it. Maybe worried about him. She kept talking. "So even if we already know what might be going on, it's better not to be hasty."

"But, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter. Soldiers like us are too stupid to think for ourselves, so we just gotta keep our mouths shut and roll over when they tell us to. Even if we were at war, they'd never admit that they let an enemy get so far across our border," Bartlett said, his tone and expression shifting to match his frustrations. He softened again as he looked back at Genette. "After having to watch this shitshow go down, I feel kinda bad for you, actually. Getting dragged into it and all."

"Nah, it's alright," Genette said with a slight, breathy chuckle to put him at ease, not bothering to fight off a smile. If nothing else, he got

to see what life was like for them all when no one was looking, just waiting for the call to action. It felt real and all the more intriguing. "It's not so bad. I get to be with you guys."

"Y'know, given all the evidence, I'll bet the Captain's probably hating this more than anybody," Pops said suddenly, the first thing he'd said since his brief conversation with Genette earlier. Genette gave a curious hum as he straightened up, furrowing his brow as he and the others turned so they were facing him. His tone was almost teasing as he approached them, wiping some grease off of his hands. "He used to have a lady friend over in Yuktobania, back when we were all on the same side."

"Really?" Genette couldn't help but feel slightly amused, turning over to find Bartlett staring at the ground with an almost sheepish look on his face. That was a side he couldn't really picture him having.

"Oh, yeah. An intelligence officer for the Yuke Army," Cruise helpfully answered for him before he could say anything about it, almost playful in the way she said it. She was almost dramatic as she added, "I had just been assigned as his backseater not long before she went back to Yuktobania, and took his heart right along with her."

"Okay, okay, can it, would ya?" Bartlett responded, smiling in spite of himself as he walked over and lightly cuffed the side of Cruise's head. She laughed it off and he shook his head in exasperation as he told Genette, "Don't listen to these two. It wasn't meant to last and it's hardly the love story they make it out to be."

"I'd say it's definitely up there," Cruise said, tapping Genette's shoulder and pointing to Bartlett's spare F-4 sitting off in the corner of the hangar. He turned to look at it, unsure what exactly he was meant to see until she pointed it out to him. It was a playing card, specifically an Ace of Hearts with a dagger cutting through it, Bartlett's personal emblem. One that Genette hadn't thought anything of at first. "Take a look at the emblem on the nose. Subtle, isn't it?"

Bartlett sighed, accepting defeat on the matter. Though Cruise and even Pops definitely enjoyed teasing him, it was hard to tell if he

was irritated they'd put him on the spot or genuinely didn't believe it to be a big deal. He seemed embarrassed, but shrugged it off, shaking his head as Genette gave him a curious look and Pops expectantly looked to him for a response. "Eh. It's just an old war wound now. Couldn't fix it even if I wanted to."

Genette didn't want to press the matter, so he was grateful when Pops changed the subject and instead questioned him and Cruise about the mission. The whole time, Genette listened, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Not only did the emblem make sense, but his personal callsign as well. Though Bartlett laughed it off, it seemed there was more to it than he was letting on, but Genette wasn't in any position to question him about it any further. They barely knew one another, after all, it wouldn't be polite. The less he knew the better.

So he stayed quiet and content with the knowledge he had, waiting for an invitation back into the discussion. Even if he couldn't write anything, he had a good feeling about things going forward. Or rather, a good feeling about the Wardog Squadron going forward. The actual situation he found himself stuck in was a completely different story.

***September 26th, 2010* .**

1300hrs.

Osea was at war. They just didn't realize it yet.

Captain Allen C. Hamilton sat in his office, listening to the roar of jet engines as Wardog Squadron took to the air on one of the recent increased patrols. They were being sent up like clockwork, with the purpose of preventing anymore trespassers from surprising them. Hamilton was perhaps the only person not in total denial over the identity of their soon to be enemy, well aware of who it was. He was privy to previous incidents in Yuktobania's territory, although that wasn't the only reason. Anyone could see from the evidence, mainly the footage of the aircraft, exactly who was responsible.

On the surface, at least . Hamilton stared at the blank page that would soon hold a report, but it wasn't for the Osean military. He'd already written that one, this report was for his own, personal reasons. An assessment of the Osean military's strategies, their aircraft, the 3rd Naval Fleet that had conducted several joint operations with the Sand Island Squadron in the past…among many other topics. To anyone that got too curious it would appear to be nothing more than some journal of sorts for the sake of documentation. Anyone that knew him well would especially have no reason to question it, but that was a practically nonexistent list.

The only potential wrench in his daily activities moving forward was that sister of his. Somewhere along the line he felt like he'd failed her. Kathryn used to be a warm and cheerful person, then as she got older she became stubborn and withdrawn. And a pain. Always thinking she had something to prove and at the end of the day all she was proving was the plethora of negative qualities she'd come to possess. On some level, he blamed their father's return and overprotectiveness, but he played a part in that, too. By now the only person that actually knew her was that friend she was so fond of, Hans Grimm.

But the main issue with Kathryn was that she did not respect Hamilton's authority, if she respected anyone's at all, and that worried him. If she wasn't careful she was going to stick her nose where it did not belong and get herself into trouble he'd be unable to help her out of. Whether either of them liked to admit such a simple fact, he was not going to be around to protect her forever. There was a limit to how much he could do for her.

Thankfully for the time being she seemed content to avoid him, and with how frequent these patrols were becoming she would hardly be around to bother him much. So for now, Hamilton was content to ignore it. He could burn that bridge when he came to it. Maybe if he was lucky, she'd be a valuable asset if it came down to it, assuming she could keep her nose clean long enough. There wasn't any point in worrying about it now.

Sighing, not getting anywhere with this report, Hamilton decided it was time to move on to his next plan for the day. He locked his laptop as a precaution, getting to his feet and setting off for the base

commander's office, sure to shut his own office door behind him. The day was no busier than usual, so there weren't many people he had to steer clear of to avoid a collision or a conversation, and fortunately for him Colonel Perrault's office wasn't very far from his own.

In a matter of minutes he arrived at his superior's door, lightly knocking on it and waiting for the ever sour sounding response as he was ordered inside. Hamilton opened the door, stepping through and closing it in a single motion. Perrault looked up at him, a scowl seemingly permanently etched into his face as he greeted his adjutant. "Captain Hamilton. Something I can help you with?"

"There's something I've been meaning to speak with you about, sir. Regarding that journalist, Mr. Albert Genette," Hamilton said, forcing himself to be formal and courteous. The Colonel wasn't exactly someone he liked working with but he'd learned quickly to stay on his good side. In addition to that, once you knew which buttons to avoid and what strings to pull in any given interaction with him, it became quite easy to control any conversation. Whether he realized it or not. But in order to do that he had to think *he* was actually in control. At all times.

"Oh? And what about him?" Perrault asked, seeming almost bored already. As if anticipating the worst, he let out a groan before Hamilton could answer. "Don't tell me he's found a way to cause trouble already. He hasn't even been here a week."

"Quite the opposite, sir. In fact, he's been a paragon of good behavior. Courteous and respectful, even given the circumstances he's found himself in," Hamilton said, choosing each and every word as carefully as he could. What he was about to ask would hardly benefit anyone, but some part of Hamilton took pity on the guy. He'd been treated more or less as a prisoner ever since the first incident. There was no telling, perhaps he'd be of use later on, but for now Hamilton just wanted a clean conscience. "Which is what I wanted to speak to you about. I feel we've misjudged him and treated him unfairly, even under the circumstances."

"It's a matter of security, simple as that. Anyone should understand that," Perrault said dismissively, almost with a sigh. "If you feel bad

for him, that's your problem, but I for one see no reason why I should feel guilty for doing my job. Now, if he came to you and filed a complaint…well, he can just get over it."

"He's filed no such complaint and he's complied with any and all regulations laid out for him. Quite willingly, I should add," Hamilton argued, sure to keep a level head. The idea had hit him earlier that day, though he knew it was a longshot. "None of what happened was his fault. It seems like overkill to essentially punish him."

"Sounds to me like you're going soft on the guy. If we give him an inch he'll be taking it a mile," Perrault said matter-of-factly, leaning back in his seat. "Once all of this is settled he's free to go, but for now I'm not going to risk having some civilian blabbing to the public that we let all of this happen. It's bad press."

"What's the worst that he could do? All of the photos and video footage have been completely destroyed. Without any evidence, there's nothing for him to report," Hamilton said. Not for the first time he wondered why he was bothering to argue this case, but in a way he just didn't want to see someone singled out the way Genette had been by Perrault. Photography and writing had been hobbies of his some time ago, before the military and life as a whole got in the way. To see someone having to stifle a passion of theirs, especially a valuable one like that, it rubbed him the wrong way. Someone had to look out for the guy. "Consider it this way…whatever happens from here, he'll be the first to dress it up for us. Willingly, even. If we refuse to return his property and send him on the way, however… that definitely *would* lead to 'bad press'."

Perrault hesitated, considering what he was being told. He often spoke to Hamilton about what a dump the base was and how someone as high and mighty as himself deserved a more glamorous post than a training base, but the second there was a chance to make himself look better he couldn't pass it up. Although Genette had come to Sand Island for Bartlett – someone that Hamilton kept his opinions about to himself – he was only welcomed because Hamilton convinced Perrault to see him as an asset. Eventually the island as a training base could rival the status of Heierlark Air Force Base. Or so Perrault seemed to think.

Eventually, he started to give in, with only some reluctance. "You seem awfully convinced of his value."

"Call it intuition. I know skill when I see it," Hamilton said, and it was the truth. He had a way of seeing potential, hence his sister and Grimm's assignment. They were good kids, they just needed direction. In this case, Genette was an excellent journalist, he just needed an ally. "He's more trustworthy than you give him credit for. I know you looked into those articles. Very few write with that level of knowledge and respect."

"Hmph. Fine." Perrault huffed. Play his ego and make him feel important and one could get anything they wanted out of him. In this case, Hamilton just had to point out a few things that would be useful to Perrault specifically. He sat up in his seat. "There are conditions to this, however. We do this my way."

Or so you may think . Hamilton kept the thought to himself. "Very well, then. Shoot."

"Until we receive official confirmation on what's going on, any footage or photography is to be heavily restricted. He will not leave his quarters unless supervised by an officer," Perrault began to rattle off a list of rules that almost sounded rehearsed, counting them off one by one on his fingers. "Any and all writing is to go through a review and approval process before publication, though that one is a given. Lastly, should his actions and words in any way prove to be disruptive and disrespectful, responsibility is to be placed on your shoulders. I hope you've considered all of this carefully. You're a good soldier, after all."

"Thank you, sir. I assure you it won't be something you'll regret," Hamilton said, and he realized not for the first time that he'd said those exact words before. To many different people, all in the name of seeking their trust and approval. In all of those instances, he hadn't yet regretted it. Although a case could be made for how badly Kathryn was capable of reflecting on him, with some careful damage control it wasn't much of an issue. Although it was arguably another burden he'd have to bear, he had a good feeling about Genette for the most part. "If things don't work out, I'll take full responsibility."

"You'd better. He'll be here on your good word, after all. And we've all seen what can come from that," Perrault said casually, making a poor attempt at subtlety. Hamilton ignored it, never once letting his poker face slip. There was a moment of silence as Perrault stared behind him at the door, an unusually thoughtful look on his face (proving he was indeed capable of thinking). Then he spoke again, changing the topic, "Whatever shitstorm is coming our way isn't going to be an easy fight, at least if the rumors from higher up the ladder are true. The last thing we need is poor PR…"

"I wholeheartedly agree, sir. Hence my belief in Mr. Genette's value," Hamilton said with a small smile, trying to appear somewhat upbeat. "No matter what happens, the military will be prepared. The public should be able to rest easy."

That was a lie, and one he said with practiced ease. From what he knew about this entire ordeal, absolutely no one on either side of this conflict would be prepared. At least not fully. He tried not to dwell on the details. He didn't want a war, and those above him and behind things likely didn't either, but as far as he could tell it was a necessary step for proper justice. It was a long awaited reckoning. All he had to do in this show was play the role he was given and everything was supposed to work out.

Perrault gave him an almost bored look, having no reason to seem at all suspicious, likely more irritated by the fact Hamilton had spoken and interrupted his thinking. He cleared his throat, crossing his arms. "As if there's any question that our military will deal with matters swiftly," he said. "As for what you needed, I'll speak with the MPs on the matter. If that's all, there's matters I need to attend to."

"Of course. Thank you for giving me the time, sir. I'll be on my way," Hamilton said, offering up a quick salute that was lazily waved off by Perrault. So he then gave a quick nod, spun on his heel, and marched quickly and quietly to the office door. Open and shut in one quick and quiet motion, almost sighing in relief as he heard the door faintly click behind him. He shook his head and set off on the return trip to his office, holding back a scoff as he glanced over his shoulder. Gullible, but his superior had his uses. Even for small, meaningless favors.

The walk back to his own office was a brisk one just as before, only with more nods and forced smiles of greeting to various peers and subordinates as he marched past them. He gave no one any indication that things were out of the ordinary, cool professionalism easily his greatest weapon. In the coming war it would serve him more than it already did, and while not looking forward to it he was confident. Either in himself and his own abilities or in that of his superiors, Osean military or otherwise.

As soon as he made it back to his office, he was quick to shut the door, though he didn't return to his seat. He lingered by the window, staring out at the runway as everyone went about business as usual for the most part. In the time he'd been gone, Wardog Squadron had completed their patrol and that familiar sound of jet engines grew closer and closer as they returned, making their approach on the runway. He kept watching, unable to keep his attention from being drawn to the aircraft. One by one the four of them landed, proceeding to taxi back to the flight line. In no time they'd be taking to the air once more. He found the whole ordeal to be a bit pointless. No amount of patrols was going to save them.

The plan was already set in motion whether anyone cared to admit it or not. Before long war stories would be making the headlines and one plane crossing the border would be the least of anyone's concerns. It would start small and then explode almost overnight. Near constant surveillance of their borders wouldn't even be enough. There were only a few people that could stop this from happening, and as far as Hamilton could tell they were satisfied so far with how things were unfolding. So there wasn't any point dwelling on the matter, not when it was out of his control. He just had to sit back and watch the show until his cue, though he could already feel himself growing restless.

As silence settled around the base once more and the aircraft disappeared from his view, Hamilton sighed and moved back to his desk, staring down at his phone and laptop as he considered his next course of action. He picked up the phone, holding the receiver to his ear and hesitating as his fingers hovered over the numbers. It was a simple call, but not a smart one to make, and certainly not on an easily compromised line. There were other people he thought to

call, anything to procrastinate on writing that report of his. His uncle, perhaps, to make sure his family was somewhere safe. Somewhere that wouldn't be a priority should Osea be attacked. Or his father, but his father had a strange way of seeing through bullshit in a heartbeat, especially when it came to his children. If he wanted to raise alarms, that was the fastest way to do it.

Admitting defeat, he set the receiver back down with a short sigh and lightly tapped it with his index finger a few times. Then he moved around his desk, returning to his seat and opening his laptop back up. There wasn't any point in doing anything else, it wouldn't do any good to procrastinate when it came to the inevitable. Just like it wouldn't do any good to make phone calls under the guise of concern. While the idea of his family being among the casualties wasn't one he liked, nor was the idea of being left in the dark until he was useful all that appealing, but there wasn't anything to be done about it.

At least he knew this war was brewing, and that would have to be enough. Eventually he'd be less powerless than he was now, able to offer more assistance than just playing puppet master with the base commander. Some part of him missed flying and being in control of what happened in the skies. He hadn't joined the air force to be stuck on the ground, but that was where his previous squadron told him he was needed, so he trusted them and complied. On some level he always knew talent and skill would only get him so far, but it still stung a little no matter how they tried to paint it. He consoled himself with the knowledge he'd have his opportunity sooner or later. For now he had to tolerate the lack of control.

Pushing any and all distractions out of his head, he began to type up his assessments of what cards Osea had hidden under their sleeve, and what threat to this war they may pose. For a moment, he wondered if it was worth noting how Wardog Squadron had performed in battle, though ultimately he decided that information would need to wait. Even he wasn't sure, in spite of his confidence in their pilots' abilities. They could easily slip up and get themselves killed much like their wingmen in that 'training incident', rendering their mention in any of his reports as pointless, or perhaps they'd continue to hold their own and prove to be a headache. Only time

would tell how things would unfold.

As the afternoon dragged on, Hamilton watched the squadron take off once more as he mused over a conclusion to his first report.

September 27th, 2010.

0730hrs.

Things had begun to return to normal, at least as far as everyone else was concerned. There hadn't been any more attacks, no more unidentified aircraft, and no official word from their higher-ups that anything was going on. Since none of their patrols over the last few days had turned up anything suspicious – and none of the military's infinite satellites or radar had detected anything worth noting – as far as anyone else was concerned there was nothing to be worried about.

The problem was, Kathryn found she wasn't very good at not worrying. It seemed she was the odd one out, as everyone else was content to not bother themselves with the situation. Well, for the most part. The only one still acting weird was Nagase, but if she was worried then no one else was going to find out about it. Bartlett was also acting somewhat unusually, but he was known for that at this point, so Kathryn wasn't quite as concerned about that. Not until she had good reason to be.

That morning in the mess hall, Kathryn scanned the room as she held onto the styrofoam tray that contained her breakfast, trying to find a suitable place for her and Hans to sit. Really, she was just trying to find someone else she was familiar with to talk to. It wasn't terribly crowded, but she was on a bit of a personal mission. One that Hans picked up on the second he'd finished getting his own food and took notice of the look on her face.

"Are things with Lieutenant Nagase really that bad?" he asked her almost immediately as he rejoined her side.

"Something's wrong and no one wants to talk to me about it,"

Kathryn responded. She'd been confiding in Hans about everything going on, and while he was clearly just as anxious he still chose to play the voice of reason. Although her main reason was concern for her friend, there was underlying curiosity or maybe even frustration motivating her as well. Fear definitely played a part, too. "I don't like being left in the dark. Especially not with how things have been."

"You really should just let it go," Hans said with a sigh, lightly grabbing hold of her arm to move her forward so they weren't in anyone's way. Simultaneously allowing him to take control of the situation and keep her from holding up their breakfast. Fair enough, she *was* hungry. "If there's something we need to know, then we'll know it. That goes for both the higher-ups and Lieutenant Nagase."

"I find it hard to believe you're actually willing to settle with that," Kathryn said, glancing up at him beside her. He looked at her, then away and said nothing. She knew him well enough to know when he was keeping his mouth shut, never one to want to make things worse no matter what it was.

"Well, it's not like what I think really matters. That's the way things are," Hans replied. Despite how his words seemed, he didn't sound irritated at all. Nervous, yes, but far from irritated. Sometimes she wondered how he kept his cool even when something clearly was bothering him, but he never taught her the secret to his patience. Nothing else was said on the matter as they reached the table he'd led her to, greeting its occupants with a pleasant smile. "Good morning."

It was one of the least crowded tables in the mess, only two people seated at it. Dogma and Arrow were seated across from each other, half-drunk cups of coffee and almost empty plates in front of them. As Kathryn took a seat beside Arrow and Hans sat across from her, Dogma gave them a half-hearted response in greeting while Arrow was the only one to return Hans' smile and pleasantries. "Good morning. We were just talking about you two."

"Oh, wonderful," Kathryn said, picking up her piece of toast. She took a bite from it before she looked over at Dogma, swallowing before she spoke. "Since when did you start gossiping?"

"Just talking about what a pain in the ass you can be. That's not gossip," Dogma retorted, forcing an almost pleasant smile and tone as he casually took a sip of his coffee. He shrugged, returning to his usual neutral expression. "In all seriousness, we were just talking about the operation the other day. The fact that you happened to come up was unintentional, trust me."

"If it makes you feel any better we were technically talking about everyone," Arrow said, finishing off the last of her coffee in a few gulps and setting the empty cup down on the table. It wasn't uncommon to see her downing more than a few cups of coffee in a day, so none of them gave it a second thought. She continued. "With how busy things have been, I didn't get a chance to talk to anyone about that…er…'UFO' incident."

"Where'd *that* rumor come from, anyways?" Hans asked Kathryn, looking over at her. Although she shouldn't have, she'd told him as much as she could recall about the operation, so he had no reason to pay attention to idle rumors. Judging from the fact Arrow was still in the dark, that meant he kept it between the two of them, grateful he hadn't betrayed her trust but feeling bad for not telling Arrow about anything.

"I'll give you three guesses," Kathryn said, glancing across the hall at where she'd just taken notice of Chopper, sitting at a table with Clown and a few soldiers she didn't know personally. Chances were Chopper didn't know them all that well either, but he'd talk to anyone that would listen. She didn't actually know if he was the source of the rumor or not, but he certainly kept it going. "I think a couple of people have been asking him about it."

Dogma straightened up to see where Kathryn was looking, shaking his head with a scoff. He almost seemed amused. "He's not confirming or denying anything, is he?"

"You think he would?" Kathryn asked, giving a short, dry laugh. "There's not really any fun in that."

"I suppose not," Dogma said with a brief laugh of his own, something rare from him. At least in Kathryn's case, though their relationship had improved now that they didn't have to directly

depend on one another in the air.

"A UFO would be infinitely more interesting than a bunch of unidentified planes," Arrow said, almost wistfully sighing. She seemed far too disappointed by the actual story, likely because it wasn't as interesting when you weren't experiencing it, but she still remained respectful as she went on. "It would probably have been a lot nicer to run into, all things considered. It sounded like you guys had your hands full."

"I can't say it's what we were expecting, that's for sure," Kathryn said, wiping bread crumbs off her fingers, trying to decide which of the fruit they'd been allowed to choose from that day looked the most appealing. The processed, pre-packaged fruit they offered all tended to taste the same, with the occasional slight difference, so it probably didn't matter much. In any case, that was the least of her concerns. "Whatever's going on, I just wish they'd stop acting like we're all stupid."

Hans sighed, reaching for his bottle of water and taking a sip before he spoke. "I told you before, if we need to know something, we'll know," he said, glancing around the table. "Besides, what could we do about it if we did know?"

"I guess there's no point stressing over it, but it does feel like an insult," Arrow said, not agreeing or disagreeing with the two of them. She wasn't touching any more of her breakfast, fidgeting instead with her empty cup. "Like…even if the two of us hadn't heard about it firsthand from you guys, anyone can see it's all a little fishy. Just because we're not high up the ladder doesn't mean we're stupid."

The whole table was silent. Kathryn stared down at her hands, turning an apple slice over in her fingers as though it was the most interesting thing in the world. She suddenly found her appetite was fading, though the hunger remained. At least now Hans couldn't pretend nothing was wrong, not when even Arrow and Dogma were willing to admit it, but still. It wasn't a victorious feeling. After a minute or so, she broke the silence. "Anybody else feel like the entire world is about to change, or am I just going crazy?"

"You feel that way from one operation?" Dogma asked her, almost

incredulously. She glared at him, and that was a good enough answer for him apparently. He scoffed. "Yeah. You're definitely going crazy. What's the point in getting worried over nothing?"

"You can act tough, but we all know you're rattled." To Kathryn's surprise, it was Arrow that confronted him. She crossed her arms as he looked over at her, unable to come up with a retort. She raised a brow, then relaxed and waved it off, not sounding mocking as she said, "Look, between nearly dying and then Edge completely zoning out, I'd be rattled, too. Everyone's in the same boat, so stop acting like you're any different."

"I'm not…rattled by any of that," Dogma muttered, glaring at Hans and Kathryn before he went about avoiding eye contact with anyone. He looked like he could have disappeared he would, brown eyes darting around before he cleared his throat and reached for his coffee. That seemed to be enough for him to collect himself, regaining his confidence. "I'm not like any of you. I understand that my superiors are just doing their jobs, same as I am."

"But if there's a war we deserve to know about it," Kathryn pointed out. By hiding everything they were just making things worse later on, not even being able to trust their own people. Kathryn understood why the general public didn't need to know, but the families of those dead soldiers deserved the truth. And so did every pilot still alive and fighting.

Dogma didn't look at her, looking around the room and trying to seem unbothered. "Yeah, and why?"

"Because we're the ones that are going to be fighting it, not them," Kathryn answered, careful not to raise her voice. But without meaning to she'd dropped the food she'd been holding to her plate and accidentally slammed her fist down. Not hard enough to catch anyone else's attention, but enough that it made her seem more angry than she was. She sighed, suddenly embarrassed, but she didn't let them see that. "Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have put him on the spot like that," Arrow quickly said, though it wasn't her fault at all and everyone knew that. Kathryn was about to open her mouth to protest, and Dogma as

well, but Arrow didn't let either one of them say a word. "It's not worth fighting about."

Hans looked over at Kathryn, who made sure to put on a blank expression, and she was certain he looked almost tired. Or worried. He was never caught in the crossfire of any confrontations or outbursts, but she knew that he hated watching from the sidelines. It's not like she was constantly picking fights, but between her brother and father she was often high-strung and short-tempered and he hated being unable to help. Now that she was at odds with her superiors and co-workers it seemed he was in the same position as he would be back home. That was enough for her to feel bad and rein things in, even if he wasn't the target of her anger.

She looked up at him, silently apologizing to him, and that seemed to be enough. He sighed and gave her a soft but exasperated look before he brushed it off, now looking between Arrow and Dogma before he broke the silence that had followed. And to Kathryn's surprise Hans asked Dogma about the other thing she'd been worried about, though whether or not it was actually on her behalf she didn't know. "So, what about Lieutenant Nagase?"

Dogma glanced at him. "What about her?"

"Blaze told me the same thing you told Arrow," Hans said, using her callsign over her actual name for the sake of the other two. "Did something happen up there to shake her?"

"Just regular nerves, probably from that first fight," Dogma replied with a shrug, slowly popping a grape into his mouth. "She just got carried away and chased the bandit a bit far out, it's not like she's the first pilot to do it."

"Yeah, but that just isn't like her," Hans pointed out, using the same logic Kathryn did to justify her concerns. He swallowed, glancing briefly at Kathryn before he continued. "Doesn't that worry you at all?"

"It probably should, but it isn't like it got us killed or anything," Dogma said, hesitating. Judging from the look in his eyes, he was clearly more bothered by it than he was letting on. Or at least it

seemed that way to Kathryn. She could read him, even if they weren't good friends. He snorted and shook his head. "Look, if something's going on in her head, she hasn't let me in on it. If we need to be worried about her then she'll come to us, but for now it's not a big deal. So ease up on her. And me, if you wouldn't mind."

"Well…I guess you're right. It was worth a shot," Hans said, looking back over at Kathryn. What he really meant was that he had tried. She gave him a grateful look and he just gave her a faint smile, returning to his breakfast.

For several minutes they all ate and enjoyed their breakfast in silence, none of them having much else to say about anything. Other than regular small talk, there just wasn't anything they needed to talk about. Not long after they settled into the quiet and worked their way through breakfast, the journalist, Genette, arrived in the mess hall. Hans and Dogma, having been facing the door, were the first to take notice of him, bringing Kathryn and Arrow's attention to him. He looked tired, but regardless he greeted everyone that acknowledged him with a friendly smile and seemed upbeat.

The first thing he did was check the room for someone, apparently for people he was familiar with as he stopped his searching as soon as Hans sat up and chose to wave him over. Kathryn expected he'd get himself something to eat first, but instead he went straight for the table, not bothering to grab anything to eat. Either he wasn't hungry, skipping breakfast, or just didn't have an appetite for what was being served. Regardless of the reason, Kathryn couldn't blame him. It wasn't the greatest food you'd ever eat, they saved the good stuff for theme days or special occasions, but it was free. Even so, no one could fault you for not eating the regular stuff that was served.

When he reached their table, Dogma and Hans moved over to allow him space to sit. Genette gratefully took the seat, greeting them as he did. "Good morning," he said, sounding polite and giving a respectful nod to them. "I'm glad I found you here. I've been hoping to speak to some of you, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Are you even allowed to be working right now? After all this nonsense?" Arrow asked, looking around at the others. She tried to keep her wording vague, but Kathryn had a pretty good feeling that

Genette wasn't quite as willing to accept what he'd been told, either.

"Well…they don't really know I'm working right now," Genette admitted, giving them an almost sheepish laugh. None of them criticized him, so he went on. "Besides, after confiscating my camera, I don't think they really care what I do. Not like there's much I *can* do, so…really, I'd just like to get to know everyone a bit better. I'm stuck here, right? And after seeing a bit of the action…consider me a bit starstruck. By all of you."

"You've only seen Nagase and Bartlett in action," Kathryn pointed out, narrowing her eyes on him. She wasn't suspicious, in fact she was almost amused by it. He'd been instantly enamored with all of them, that much was clear, but Bartlett and Nagase were the only pilots he'd seen enough of to form a real opinion on.

"That's fair enough," Genette admitted, not at all nervous. He did seem to like talking fast, though. "Truth be told, I'd like to know more about the operation, but I'd never publish any of that information. And really, truthfully, I *do* want to know all of you better. Captain Bartlett and Lieutenant Cruise can't sing your praises enough, so clearly you're all very special, right?"

"That's probably a matter of perspective," Dogma said, at last finishing off his coffee and setting the cup down. He seemed uninterested in the conversation for the most part.

"Well…maybe so," he said, now letting out an almost nervous sounding laugh.

Kathryn almost felt bad for him. She knew how much it sucked to not be able to do your job, having been grounded more than once since she'd been flying. It felt awful, to have something you were good at and to be driven, but to be unable to do your job. Right now, Genette was probably bored, maybe even frustrated, and no doubt he felt useless. At least, that's what she assumed based on her own experiences. So she decided to throw him a bone. "What exactly do you want to know?"

Genette's eyes almost lit up, but he maintained his composure as he spoke. "Anything that you'd all like to share. Why you joined up, how

you're all doing, whatever it is you're striving for…simple things like that," he went through what seemed like a mental checklist. "We can start small, it's not like this is any kind of official interview. Completely off the record."

"Do you always befriend the people you're gonna be writing about?" Arrow asked him, hiding her own amusement it seemed. It was hard to be annoyed with the guy.

"I try to, not that it always works. People seem to think I'm ever after a story, which I am but not for the reasons they think," Genette explained, probably not used to being *asked* the first question instead of *doing* the asking. "I like to hear people's stories, not because I want to make money off of them as much as because I think they're worth listening to. Some of the best stories never get told, or so they say."

The discussion began to evolve naturally, none of them having very much to share with him. Likely nothing they set out for. They did end up sharing their thoughts about the attacks, finding he hated not being in the know almost as much as they did even if he understood it. It wasn't a forced discussion, and Kathryn had a feeling they all kept the topic on work to avoid feeling pressured to share mundane, personal facts about themselves. Frankly, it's not like they had much of a personal life these days, and if they did they'd want to keep it personal for as long as they could. So they all discussed the things that they could connect with. In this case, how their jobs surprisingly overlapped. At least in Genette's case.

Kathryn wasn't sure what to make of him if she was being honest. He'd gotten sucked into journalism because he liked stories, of any kind, and he enjoyed sharing them. He also admitted he had a knack for history and military knowledge, another thing all of them could attest to. Apparently, as was the case for many other people, what first piqued his curiosity was the Belkan War and that old documentary. Hans and Kathryn didn't share their thoughts on that war with anyone, and they each had their reasons, both personal. But thankfully, they weren't pressed on the matter, using the excuse they were too young at the time.

The conversation went on from there, Kathryn had lost the interest

to continue listening after the war fifteen years ago had been brought up. It was an awful war, for one, and unfortunately the only war she knew intimate details on. The stories her father told her were ones she *had* to keep to herself, a sharp contrast to the stories Hans' uncle had told them. One tried to paint a painful but hopeful picture, one that was reflected in the documentary everyone was so fond of and that Genette seemed to share, while the other had long since struggled to find any hope. Kathryn was well acquainted with the latter's struggles, and she almost hated him for it. Which said more about her than anything, but that was her problem.

She was completely snapped out of her own thoughts as a voice came over the PA system, the speakers making the voice of whatever soldier had gotten stuck with the duty sound incredibly jarring. " *Wardog Squadron, report for briefing immediately. Repeat, Wardog Squadron, report for briefing immediately.* "

"Ah. Wonderful. Looks like there's something to be worried about after all, Hamilton," Dogma said to Kathryn as he stood up, snatching his empty tray up with it. He set off for the door without another word, discarding his tray and not waiting for anyone else.

Kathryn ignored the look Genette gave her when he heard her name, getting to her feet as Chopper and Clown already set off after Dogma. The latter called out for her to hurry up, a sense of urgency in his voice that did nothing to help her nerves. She cursed under her breath, doubtful she'd be the last one to arrive given the fact both Alto and Nagase were absent from the mess hall but scared to death about what could have possibly come up. She reached to grab her trat, intending to throw it away on her way out, but Hans stopped her as soon as he noticed she'd started shaking from her nerves.

"Don't worry about it, I'll clean up. You should go," Hans told her, grabbing her wrist and pulling down slightly so she'd lower the tray back to the table. His touch was oddly soothing, enough so that she relaxed a bit.

"Right. I'm sorry, thanks," Kathryn said quickly, her adrenaline already spiking. And she wasn't even in the air nor did she have any idea what they were about to be briefed on. After everything that had

happened, they were all prepared for the worst.

"Be careful," Hans said, trying to offer her a reassuring smile. He was probably just as worried. She knew Hans didn't like being on the ground, either, but he never complained and some selfish part of her was glad she didn't have to worry about him in the air. So for now, she didn't know if it was relieving to leave him behind or not, but for now she tried not to concern herself with it.

"I'll try," Kathryn told him, returning the smile. His efforts calmed her down enough that she didn't race off like the others, setting off across the mess hall at a brisk walk instead, trying to further calm her nerves as she left. The last thing she wanted was to add to his concerns even more than she already had, and she couldn't take off without a clear head. If there was a fight, she had to be focused.

That was easier said than done, though. Even though none of them had any idea what they'd be walking into today, Kathryn's instincts told her that it wasn't good.

And Then There Were Three

Chapter Four: And Then There Were Three

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Sand Island Air Force Base, Ceres Ocean.

***September 27th, 2010* .**

0830hrs.

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The absence of the base commander was the first thing Kathryn took notice of when she arrived for their briefing, only Bartlett and Thunderhead standing at the front of the room while Cruise sat not far from them. Although everyone else seemed just as nervous as Kathryn was, nobody voiced any of their concerns. In fact, oddly enough, no one said a thing, something that was unusual especially given that Clown and Chopper were seated right beside each other. Even if they had no idea what was happening, they were all still on edge after what had happened a few days ago.

To Kathryn's surprise, Nagase was already there when she arrived, keeping her arms crossed and her gaze straight ahead. She almost seemed distant, not reacting to anything around her. Just a perfect, blank stare ahead. Kathryn chose to leave her be, as did Dogma given that he'd put one chair between him and Nagase. No wonder he was concerned about her, she seemed nothing like how she was before all of this happened. She was always quiet and shy but this felt like more than that.

Remembering her conversations over breakfast, Kathryn took a seat beside Clown and decided not to worry about it just as Alto finally arrived. She quickly made her way over to Chopper, giving Bartlett and Cruise an apologetic smile as they took notice of her, and took a seat without a word. Chopper whispered something to her, likely playfully chastising her for being late considering the fact she lightly

shoved his head away from her and told him they had better things to worry about. All things considered, she had a point. But also, Kathryn wondered just how urgent it was given the fact their captain's conversation was still ongoing.

They all kept their eyes on Bartlett as he seemed to be bickering with Thunderhead almost, likely something to do with previous operations or whatever was coming up now, and after a couple of minutes Bartlett threw his hands up in defeat and turned away. Cruise straightened up as soon as she noticed his scowl, and Kathryn and the others tried not to get caught watching the whole exchange. She heard Bartlett say to Cruise, "Forget about it," as he took his seat beside her. Thunderhead shook his head, clearly exasperated, and then took a look around the room to make sure they were all there.

"Alright. About time you were all here. We've got a possible situation on our hands," Thunderhead said to them, turning around and booting up the laptop. The same map from a few days ago was displayed, though it seemed he'd already pinpointed the area around Sand Island to avoid them all catching a glimpse of what Kathryn saw during their last briefing. There wasn't any doubt in her mind that their allies across the ocean were the prime suspects. With a few clicks, the screen centered on Sand Island, circled in light blue, while a set of crosshairs repeatedly centered on it with a set of coordinates as Thunderhead began to explain. "Getting right to it, we detected a ship of unknown origin approaching the Sand Island coastline."

"What kind of ship?" Cruise asked him. Whatever Bartlett had been discussing with Thunderhead clearly wasn't in regards to the mission, or Kathryn had a feeling that Cruise would have at least overheard something about it.

"We're not sure. But we've confirmed that the ship has launched numerous unmanned aerial vehicles, probably used for reconnaissance. They're likely the same force behind previous…er, incidents," Thunderhead said, glancing at the door to make sure it was shut. Alto must have closed it behind her, as it was indeed shut, but he seemed to be playing it safe. He turned, opening a new window on the computer to display the current location of the ship,

the UAVs, and the island. It also showed Wardog Squadron and the approach they'd be taking on their intercept. He cleared his throat and went on. "The UAVs will likely return to the launch ship for retrieval after completing their spy operations."

"Chasin' off that bird of theirs wasn't enough, so they just decided to switch up their tactics, huh?" Clown piped up, sounding slightly annoyed and maybe even a little tired. "You'd think they'd've learned."

"Unless us having the balls to shoot back at them caught their attention," Chopper pointed out with a scoff, speaking with a mix of pride and irritation towards their unknown enemy. "But then again, that'd be a good reason to stay away if you ask me. No one's crazy enough to keep coming back for more."

"Seems to me like they're persistent. Whoever it is must really have it out for us," Alto said, her focus entirely on the screen in front of them. By 'us', unlike Chopper, she wasn't referring just to their squadron but to Osea as a whole. She sighed. "So, are we supposed to try and chase them off for good?"

"That's correct," Thunderhead answered with a nod. He turned and pulled up a new screen, now displaying the amount of UAVs they'd be going up against and their positions. "Your orders are to halt this operation by intercepting and destroying these recon drones before they can be recovered by the ship. However, once again you are not to attack the ship until further orders are received. Do I make myself absolutely clear?"

Kathryn could feel herself already frustrated, just from the way he looked over each and every one of them before his gaze landed on the Captain. All of them looked to Bartlett for his reaction, and after a few seconds he got to his feet and stretched out. "Yeah, crystal. Jeez, you worry too much," he said with a huff. "So long as they don't give us any trouble, we won't give them any."

Thunderhead gave a frustrated sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose as Bartlett began to walk away. " *Captain Bartlett* ," he said to stop him, a warning clear in his voice. Bartlett hesitated and allowed him to repeat his order. "Do not fire under any circumstances. Need

I remind you, your career is not the only thing on the line when you disobey orders."

Bartlett was aware of each and every one of them watching the exchange while Thunderhead stared him down, but if the attention bothered him he didn't let them see. He shook it off, not giving Thunderhead a response either way as he set off for the door. As soon as it opened, the sounds of activity outside the room flooded in and he raised his voice over it to call out, "Let's go, nuggets, we're wastin' time down here."

Kathryn and Cruise were the first to get to their feets and follow him, Nagase right behind them, then one by one their other squadronmates jumped up after them. Thunderhead remained behind, able to operate on the ground given the proximity of the operation to the island. If his issues with Bartlett were anything more than simply annoyance at his disregard for their orders, none of them gave it a second thought at that moment, focused entirely on getting into the air and carrying out their mission.

It seemed straightforward enough, but their last mission had seemed the exact same way. And the first attack was the result of a straightforward intercept. The nagging feeling Kathryn had from earlier was back. Something was wrong, and she didn't want to find out what. At least once she was in the air she could do something about it. Or so she hoped.

Still, it was hard to focus on anything other than her mission. As they walked, Kathryn picked up her pace to fall in step beside the Captain. His stride was longer than hers, so it took some effort to stay by his side. Although hesitant to bring up her concerns, she spoke before she could give herself the chance to back down. At least she thought before she spoke. "Captain? Could I ask you something?"

Bartlett seemed surprised, glancing at her. "Sure. Shoot."

"Does something feel off about this whole thing to you?" Kathryn asked, feeling almost silly for being so worried about it. Up until a few days ago, things had been all fun and games for the most part. She always knew war was a possibility, but she figured it would be

more up front. And that they would actually know they were at war. But things had been so quiet and not at all peaceful, then Bartlett was clearly ruffled by all of it even if he tried not to show it. Allowing them to open fire during their previous operation was a clear sign of that. "It's just that none of this feels right."

"War won't ever feel right. I've been through one, so take it from me," Bartlett responded, his answer apparently more harsh than he'd intended. Kathryn didn't take offense to the fact he'd answered so roughly, but he must not have meant to nearly snap at her that time. To her surprise, his tone almost softened and he briefly, playfully placed a hand on the top of her head. An almost fatherly gesture. "C'mon, quit lookin' so down. I'll tell you what I told Nagase. There's nothin' you need to worry about up there. That's *my* job. So take it easy, alright, Kid?"

"Yes, sir," Kathryn answered, trying to give him peace of mind. He didn't need to worry either, not after all of them had proven they could handle themselves in a dogfight. But if that knowledge didn't even set her mind at ease, she doubted their Captain was going to be able to stop worrying about them. Although uncertain about what they were caught up in, she tried to focus on one thing at a time. For now, that was to get into the air, shoot down the drones, and come back alive.

It'd be a breeze. Or that's what a more optimistic person would have said.

0900hrs.

Wardog Squadron circled around Sand Island and held their formation as they moved to intercept, the drones already showing up on their radar just as soon as they were in the air. Regardless of how anxious she'd been on the ground, Kathryn found herself less concerned by the prospect of facing a robot over an actual human pilot. They were hardly intelligent, being remote-controlled from the ship no doubt rather than acting entirely on its own, and probably less agile. Even so, she would be sure to keep her guard up.

Almost as soon as they got in formation, Thunderhead's voice came through the radio, almost barking the order at them. "Wardog, this is Thunderhead! Unmanned recon drones have turned tail and are returning to the spy vessel," he announced quickly, not bothering to beat around the bush. "Shoot them down before they can return to the ship."

"Yeah, sure thing," Bartlett said, sounding more tired than usual. Kathryn might have been worried about him, but she didn't think it was her place. Captain or not he wouldn't appreciate it, especially not when he had just told her not to worry about things. She chose to leave it alone, given that they had more pressing matters, and Bartlett himself didn't linger on it long. "Alright, then, y'all got that, gang?"

"Wardog 2, roger that," Nagase sounded off first, sounding like she was just barely managing to move through the motions. "Moving to intercept now."

"Wardog 3, roger. Looks like it's gonna be a real piece of cake," Chopper said, but although he tried to remain upbeat it almost sounded like he was being sarcastic.

"I'm begging you not to get too cocky, I'd like to stand a chance against karma," Alto said, half-joking. At least for the most part anyways.

"I'd be more worried about standing a chance against the Captain, personally," Kathryn added, knowing if Chopper slipped up at all both of them would get a nice, loud and long lecture from Bartlett. She moved on to acknowledge Bartlett, not really looking to get into it with anyone before they'd even engaged. "Anyways. Wardog 4, roger that, we're right behind you guys. Just lead the way."

"Good, let's go," Bartlett said, the first to throttle up. The three of them all followed after him, maintaining their heading as they flew out to meet the enemy. They were well out over the ocean before the blips appeared on their radar, not exactly right above Sand Island but way too close for comfort. The ship showed up as well, a bit further out but still within range. It was another second or two before the drone ahead appeared on their HUDs. Kathryn noticed

Bartlett didn't ease up on the throttle, so she didn't either. As they closed in, he spoke up once again, refreshing their enemies. "Our orders are to not fire on the ship, you understand?"

Nagase was the first one to answer. "Understood."

"I can kinda guess their reasonin', but…is there a better reason than doin' it just because they told us too?" Clown asked, not sounding too thrilled about the dogfight they were about to be in.

Dogma was the one that answered, surprisingly civil when he did. There was almost no bitterness there at all. "Do you really *need* a better reason?"

"One reason is that it's cleaner this way," Cruise said before Clown could answer, maybe to avoid any kind of argument. It was less Clown that would take issue with the response and more Kathryn or Chopper that might have something to say, even if they tried their hardest not to. Well, probably not their hardest. Cruise knew them well enough to know all of that by now. "We shoot down their toys and show them we're not playing around without causing some kind of big incident. Like the last time we were up here. It's kind of hard to keep things from escalating when people's lives are involved."

"Exactly, so what are we supposed to do if they fire on us?" Kathryn couldn't help but ask. It's not like she liked the idea of being the reason an all out war was started, but 'what-ifs' were a specialty of hers. "The last time we tried to play nice they expected us to roll over and die. Are we expected to do that today too, if push comes to shove?"

"Jeez, Kid, calm down," Chopper commented, almost sounding exasperated. She knew it probably wasn't helping anyone's anxieties, and normally Kathryn might not have shared it, but some of them were probably thinking it.

To Kathryn's surprise, Nagase almost agreed with her. "Blaze makes a good point, you can't deny that," she said slowly. "At the same time, we'd do better to turn tail and run if that happens. Better than keeping the cycle going, right?"

Without much time on their hands, it was hard to get into a discussion about it. Even Bartlett, who usually had no issue saying what he thought, gave an almost irritated sigh about the whole exchange as he made an attempt to put an end to the whole thing. "You know that you two worry way too much?" he asked, and it was a rhetorical question. "By all means, be prepared, but some bridges oughta be crossed when you come to 'em."

"Right, exactly. So take it easy and stop losing your heads," Chopper added, apparently feeling especially proud that Bartlett more or less agreed that they should 'calm down'. Like he was one to talk given how he could get under pressure. He gave a chuckle, adding in an almost playful tone, "See, Captain? Stuff like this just goes to show you that *I'm* high-ranking officer material."

"Hard to disagree, I guess…" Bartlett grumbled, not sounding all that happy about the response. He recovered quickly, though, addressing Kathryn and Nagase as he said, "So, you two just gonna take that from him or are you gonna prove me wrong?"

First and foremost I'm gonna kill *Chopper* . Kathryn almost wanted to say, not that it was in any way a genuine sentiment. It was hard to be mad at him, let alone stay mad at him. Instead, she tried to wipe off her smirk and focus on the task in front of them, forcing a breathy laugh as she answered. "Hell no, I'm not letting him get away with that."

"Good." Bartlett's tone suggested he was planning something, and just a few moments later they found out what it was. They were practically nose to nose with the UAVs now, just out of range to lock on. An issue that their mindless opponents didn't share, as warnings in Kathryn's ear confirmed they were all being tracked on radar. Bartlett abruptly braked and pulled up, causing all three of them to shoot past him, putting them nose to nose with the enemy. Something he wouldn't have done unless he was fully convinced they weren't in danger against these things. Right as he did that, he called out, "Now show me what you've got, Kid!"

A split second later and Kathryn heard the familiar tone of a radar lock, with Clown announcing it immediately after and encouraging her to shoot. Without hesitation, Kathryn and the others fired on their

targets simultaneously. Although they should have been smaller and more agile, the UAVs were only as good as who or whatever was controlling them, so they weren't able to react as fast as they probably could. All three missiles struck their targets, wiping out the first enemy group, putting a dent in their numbers right out of the gate. Kathryn couldn't help but let out a quiet cheer to herself, hearing Clown do the same behind her.

Kathryn checked the skies around them, trying to find where the next group of enemies were. She couldn't see anything right away, figuring they were spread out farther than they thought. It seemed Clown had roughly the same idea she did, checking their radar for any sign of their enemy. Once he spotted something, he was quick to inform her as well as the others. "Looks like they're pretty far out. Anyone got eyes on 'em?"

"I can see them on radar," Alto spoke up, assessing what she could of the situation. "Best guess, they're closing in on that ship of theirs. You guys better gun it if you plan on making the intercept in time."

"Already on it," Kathryn called out. She throttled up, banking to her left and heading out towards their target. Right as she began the abrupt turn, she gave Clown a last minute warning she probably could have given sooner. "Hang on, Clown, we're going for a ride!"

As Kathryn headed out to greet the rest of their enemies, the other two were quick to follow suit while Bartlett trailed behind them. He let them take the lead, clearly trusting their skills against the drones, but Kathryn was sure he'd jump in if he really had to. Even if he took up the rear he stayed close by to offer support when and if it was needed, and under the circumstances Kathryn couldn't help but feel like she was back in flight school with an instructor breathing down her neck every step of the way. It made her more nervous than she probably should have been, like she had to do everything perfectly or else her wings were going to get clipped. It was something she should have been used to, so she set the thought aside and tried to keep her focus on the mission.

The three aircraft closed the distance between their targets in no time, almost like they were racing to get there. Just as the targets, a group of four drones this time, appeared on Kathryn's HUD, Dogma

announced that they were closing in. "You're gonna be right on top of them any second now," he said. In as playful a tone as anyone could ever get from them, he scoffed and added, "Show them the same hospitality as before, yeah?"

"Switching over to special weaponry. I think we should try and take them out before they have a chance to counter," Nagase said quickly, doing exactly what she said. She throttled up, pulling ahead of Kathryn some and adjusting her angle ever so slightly. She got a lock, which Dogma quickly announced, and she fired an SASM before breaking to the right to make a wide approach on the remaining drones. Her missile struck its target dead on, wiping it out. Matter-of-factly, trying to remain cool-headed and professional, she informed the rest of them of it, speaking mainly to Thunderhead and Bartlett. "This is Edge, scratch one hostile."

After getting the idea from Nagase, Kathryn had also switched over to her own SASMs, intending to get a bit closer even though she was well within range of it. The second she took down her target she wanted to split off the remaining two, and that's exactly what she intended to do. Chopper meanwhile veered off to the left, following Nagase's second strategy to corral the remaining drones. Kathryn reached her target first, firing and immediately breaking to chase the first drone that countered, switching back to her regular missiles. She grunted at the sudden movement even though she knew it was coming, vaguely aware of Clown cursing under his breath behind her and reminding her she should have given him some kind of warning.

The first drone she'd gone after went down, leaving her to tangle with the other she'd gone after while Chopper and Nagase both seemingly competed for the last of the remaining two. The drone Kathryn was tailing pulled up abruptly, forcing her to follow at a lower altitude and sharper angle so she could stay on top of it. She remembered this time she wasn't the only one along for this ride, managing to warn Clown of her movements with enough time for him to brace himself. She grunted at the movement, but the strain wasn't anything she wasn't able to handle. Although not too close for missiles, it wasn't a difficult shot to make, and she said as much to her RIO. "Clown, I'm switching to guns. No point in wasting missiles

on this thing."

"Roger that, just take 'im down," Clown said through a huff, sounding more than a little strained but handling it well. For the most part, at least as far as Kathryn could tell.

Lining up the shot, Kathryn's finger immediately tightened around the trigger as she fired, holding it down and adjusting her sights as the drone moved. The bullets landed in sporadic shots and it wasn't long before the wing was completely shredded off, leaving it to fall down to the ocean below. Kathryn let out a breath, pulling around and leveling out just in time to see Chopper wipe out the last drone before Nagase could fire on it. Seeing how easy it was to take them down, she almost felt stupid for being so anxious earlier. But even with the drones gone, she wasn't able to fully shake her uneasiness.

"Well, well, thanks a lot for leaving some enemies for me, Kid," Chopper joked as he leveled out as well, Nagase right on his wing. He clearly wasn't grateful at all given that she'd only left him with one. "I mean, damn. If I knew you two were gonna go at them like that I would have suggested a nice little competition of kill scores. They're just drones after all, not like we'd have a guilty conscience over it, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Not like anyone's gonna argue over that," Kathryn said, leaning her head back as best she could. She hadn't expected it to be that simple, now just waiting for the all clear from Thunderhead to return to base. Chopper was right. Taking drones down felt a lot better than going up against real pilots, but it wasn't like they had much of a choice in either with the way things had played out. She swallowed. "Guess we can just go home, now?"

"They'll give us the green light to RTB any minute now, just be patient. Unless they've got more errands for us," Cruise commented, her and Bartlett both having been silent until the latter pulled their aircraft around to regroup with them, all of the drones defeated. She didn't seem at all bothered she hadn't had much work to do, though knowing her she was bound to lecture Bartlett about it later. Probably just to save face. She continued, sounding like she was half joking. "But I seriously doubt it. I don't think they trust us with recon missions anymore."

"Why sound so disappointed?" Bartlett asked her, sounding like he was smirking. She didn't answer him back and that seemed perfectly fine with them. As the four of them continued to circle around, wasting fuel more than anything, he turned the topic back around to the operation. "Anyways, how're you all feelin'? Pretty easy, right?"

"Yes, sir," Nagase replied quietly, sounding like she was starting to zone out again.

"Yeah, it was," Kathryn agreed. She bit down on her tongue, quite literally, wondering if she should bother voicing her thoughts. It's not like it was much. But even so, she wanted to get it off her chest. After a few seconds of debating, her impulsiveness won out and she added, "But did anyone else feel like it was almost too easy?"

"There she goes again…" Dogma muttered with an exasperated sigh. "At this rate we're all gonna be dead because you can't stop mouthing off."

"Not to side with him, but he's got a point," Clown said, forcing a chuckle and trying to keep things light. Kathryn guessed he probably heard her suck in a breath, fully intending to fire off the first retort that came to mind, but Clown's interruption made her forget what she was going to say. Which almost calmed her down. He continued, almost gently. "Quit worryin' so much or you're gonna jinx us."

"I told you to leave that to me, didn't I, Kid?" Bartlett asked her. She didn't answer, hoping he meant it to be rhetorical. He waited only a few seconds, giving her a chance to reply, but she didn't take the opening. So he didn't prompt one, which she was almost grateful for. "Anyways, you did good. Almost made me want to jump in there with you."

"Hey, sir, why didn't you?" Alto asked, almost awkwardly, clearing her throat. Her question was a genuine one, choosing not to join in on the banter.

"Figured I oughta give you nuggets a chance to shine. It's not like they gave you much trouble, right?" Bartlett said, again with the rhetorical questions. It was like it was his own way of controlling the

conversation, though whatever his reason for that was Kathryn could only guess. He sounded almost dismissive as we went on. "So, I just hung back and left you guys to play with those toys, and it worked out just fine. Maybe I oughta let y'all loose more often."

"Translation: drones bore me and I can't be bothered to work," Cruise said with a snicker, and Chopper and Clown couldn't hold back their own laughter. Kathryn stifled hers, letting it out in the form of a short snort.

"Yeah, yeah, very funny. You're always complaining about my flying, so how about you cut it out before I turn this thing into a roller-coaster ride," Bartlett said, sounding almost embarrassed with just the hint of a playful warning underneath his words. It sounded like he got called 'asshole' underneath a stifled scoff, but Kathryn couldn't be sure. And he didn't address it, instead radioing Thunderhead. "Hey, Heartbreak One to Thunderhead, you guys gonna let us come home today or what?"

"Standby Wardog Squadron, assessing the situation now," Thunderhead said. And that's where it all went wrong.

There was an alert that sounded in the cockpit, enough to startle Kathryn. She knew what it was, even before Clown announced they were picking up something else on radar. "Hey, Thunderhead, it looks like we've got new contacts on radar. Hard to tell yet, but this ain't lookin' good. Y'all seein' anything up there?"

"We've got eyes on the situation now. Multiple bogeys inbound, closing fast," Thunderhead informed them quickly and clearly, sounding more calm than Kathryn felt. As if this sort of thing was just becoming another day in the office. For him it probably was, but he wasn't down here dogfighting with those guys. "They're unidentified fighters, not recon drones. Likely reinforcements like before."

Bartlett let out an irritated groan, his voice having a hint of suspicion in it as he asked, "Is it the same attack axis as before?"

"280. Same vector as before," Thunderhead confirmed. "It's just further confirmation they're with the same group you intercepted last time."

"Geez, this is getting ridiculous. Just how many planes do they have lined up at the border over there, huh?" Bartlett asked, though his question was rhetorical. He was the first to withdraw, banking and turning back towards the island. "C'mon, I'm not getting us in over our heads again. We've only got four on our side and I'd like to not get outnumbered again. We'd better abort the op."

"The Captain's giving in?" Alto asked, sounding genuinely surprised by it. "That's…new."

"Should we be worried?" Kathryn asked, trying to make it sound like she was joking. But really she wasn't. She didn't know if she wanted a fight or not. The drones had been easy, so it wouldn't be difficult to engage the fighters. But at the same time having no idea who they were fighting just made the whole thing that much more intimidating.

"Relax, just trust me." Bartlett answered almost right away, his tone surprisingly soft. She must have sounded more nervous than she meant to. Either that or he really was perceptive enough to see through anyone's BS. No one else seemed to pick up or acknowledge that fact. Bartlett continued before she could say anything else, not giving her a chance to question him. "Wardog Squadron withdrawing now and returning to base. Think you can manage to stick to my tail this time, Kid?"

Kathryn hesitated for only a moment, able to get a visual on the enemy. They really had closed in fast, faster than she had expected anyways, but they were still just dark specks on the horizon. She swallowed and turned to follow Bartlett, taking up a position off his wing while Nagase followed opposite her. "Yes, sir," Kathryn said, keeping her eye on the throttle while Clown kept his attention glued to the radar and their tail. "Right behind you."

"Good girl," Bartlett said, just like he had the other day, only slightly less smug and mocking. Not by much, though. Surprisingly, Kathryn didn't feel annoyed by it, actually finding it amusing enough this time to let it ease her worries. It shouldn't have been surprising that he knew what he was doing. Quickly, he added, "Oh, hey, and same to you Nagase. I don't need you straying off again. Let's all get home in one piece, yeah?"

"I'm on it, Captain, you don't have to worry about me," Nagase replied, and there was the slightest hint of annoyance in her voice. It reminded Kathryn of the look on her face during that first briefing following the attack, and she started to wonder if being treated like a problem child that had to be reined in was getting to her. Kathryn knew the feeling. And suddenly she felt bad for being worried and trying to pry since their previous operations.

As the three of them began to throttle up and set their course to return, Chopper was slower to pull around and follow. Maybe he'd trailed off further than Kathryn had noticed, she wasn't really sure why he was slower to react than they were. Or maybe the enemy aircraft were just faster than they were, desperate enough to burn out their engines to protect the ship down below. Not that Kathryn was in any position to judge them for that, but being on the receiving end of that kind of determination and not being able to do anything was frustrating. But none of them were really expecting this kind of fight today.

The four interceptors closed in faster than Kathryn had expected, and while she and Nagase were close enough to Bartlett and far enough from the aircraft that it wasn't an issue for them, Chopper wasn't quite so lucky. The blip on radar that identified his position was covered by the enemy interceptors, and Alto was the one that made their predicament known, missile alerts sounding off in the background as she spoke. She raised her voice a bit, understandably shaken. "Missile in the air! C'mon, break or we're toast, Chopper!"

"Aww crap!" Chopper spat with a frustrated groan, and there was a brief silence as he pulled evasive maneuvers. Kathryn craned her neck, hoping she could get sight of him behind her, and she guessed Clown was probably doing the same. Chopper's voice came over the radio again, following a grunt, sounding more strained than before. "Shit! I don't think I can make it, they're running me down!"

"Oh, you're taking the trail position today, Rock 'n Roller? Bet it's not so funny anymore," Bartlett said dryly, almost sounding like he was joking but not quite. Abruptly, he braked and broke off his retreat, turning his nose back around towards where Chopper was

struggling to evade the four fighters. "Guess they're not letting us get off that easy today. Hold on, Motormouth, I'll clear your six o' clock for you."

"Dammit, I may as well have drawn the short straw today…" Chopper grumbled, clearly regretting his decision to take up the rear. It might have been funny under better circumstances, but right now there wasn't anything to laugh about.

Kathryn abruptly broke off to follow the Captain, the sudden jerk and half-roll to the side catching Clown off guard. As soon as she'd leveled out the plane and turned her nose around, she throttled up to follow. "Damn, Blaze, would ya take it easy up there?" he asked with a huff, having quickly regained his composure. There wasn't another complaint from him, so she guessed he was already getting to work.

"Captain, what're our orders?" Kathryn asked, but given she was already moving to jump into the fight it wasn't like she had an issue waiting for those orders. Her heart was racing, probably a mix of both fear and excitement but the former was the stronger between the two. And she didn't exactly hate that.

Bartlett didn't answer right away, pausing only a moment to force Chopper's main pursuer off his tail and wipe him out. As soon as Cruise called out his lock he fired a missile and the enemy fighter. The missile struck its target, taking it out in one swift movement. As soon as the fighter went down, all of it taking place in the blink of an eye, Bartlett called out an answer to Kathryn through a growl and gritted teeth. "Everyone else, quit gawkin' and start shootin'!"

"Guess we're doing this," Kathryn said without thinking, reaching the group of fighters and splitting off one of the remaining three as it tried to move to target Bartlett, Chopper already trying to shake off the other two. Once she was sure she could stay on its tail, she quickly added, "Wardog 4 engaging!"

"Well, here we go again…" Clown muttered, but he didn't stay down long. He jumped back into his usual, more upbeat self, offering her some encouragement as he braced himself for the dogfight maneuvers that were sure to follow. "Let's get it done, Kid!"

"Don't worry. Just remember your training, you'll be fine," Bartlett told them, already working to get another fighter off of Chopper's tail.

"Captain Bartlett!" Thunderhead's voice broke through, sounding genuinely appalled that they were moving to engage. Much like their previous operation, he refused to look at it as anything other than an intentional defiance of orders, as if they asked to be fired on. And just like before, the only thing he could do was yell at them as if that was going to change anything. "Stand down, Wardog Squadron, you are not cleared to engage at this time!"

Just like before, they ignored him, following Bartlett's lead over the orders their AWACS controller was shouting at them. They'd be paying for it later, but there wasn't any time for them to worry about that. By now, Nagase had circled back around to engage the fighters, aiding Bartlett in forcing one of the fighters to cease his pursuit of Chopper, making it easier for him to shake the remaining bandit. Nagase pursued her target more aggressively than expected, matching Bartlett and Kathryn's aggression for the sake of the fight. As she swooped in, almost rubbing extra salt into Thunderhead's wound, she said, "Wardog 2, Edge engaging. I've got him in my sights!"

"You've almost got him," Dogma said, almost sounding encouraging. Likely because he didn't have much of a choice in the matter, and not doing his job under those circumstances was probably just as bad as disobeying their orders. "Don't let him slip away, Nagase!"

She didn't, staying glued to her target's tail with Bartlett's help. Kathryn meanwhile had successfully downed one of the fighters, now close enough to tell that it was a group of MiGs that they were up against though it was hard to make out their markings. Whoever they were, their pilots put up quite a fight against them, though Kathryn was able to adapt. Their flying was a lot like that of the pilots from the last operation.

The MiG climbed sharply and Kathryn followed him, getting a lock but waiting for him to try and shake her lock before she moved to follow and ended up wasting a missile. Just as she predicted, the aircraft leveled out and gave her an opening. She rolled to adjust her angle, grunting, and got a lock from down below, firing a missile and

immediately breaking away. It hit the mark, taking the aircraft's wing off, and Kathryn and Clown watched the pilot ditch the plane from above them. She banked, steering clear of the wreckage as it spiraled down to the ocean.

Nagase also succeeded in taking down her target, remaining glued to his tail the whole time. She bided her time while Bartlett made sure that the enemy didn't have a chance to shake her off, and within a matter of seconds she was able to gain the upper hand in the fight. She got a lock and took the shot, wiping out the third fighter in the blink of an eye. She let out a sigh and announced the kill, sounding as though she was surprised in herself. "This is Edge, splash one hostile!"

"He's disappeared from radar, that's one confirmed kill for Wardog 2," Dogma announced, sounding unusually confident as well. As the aircraft went down, the pilot had the sense to eject, Nagase was quick to steer clear of what remained of the MiG as it began an out of control dive towards the sea. As they were clear, Dogma got a look at the situation. "Wardog 3 is still in a tight spot. Chopper, Alto, how're things working out for you two over there?"

"This guy's stubborn. Or maybe Chopper's just having an off day…" Alto responded, as though she was speaking through gritted teeth. She sounded nervous, too, and luckily for her Chopper seemed too focused on trying to shake the enemy to make a comeback. To Chopper, she added, "I swear if you get me killed I'm gonna haunt you for the rest of your life. Now move it, would you?! This guy's almost got a radar lock!"

"Y'know, if anything happens to you it ain't like I'm gonna be any better off. Now hang on," Chopper shot back, clearly not taking kindly to her comments. With the fight all happening in the blink of an eye, Kathryn and Nagase were both already moving to offer him support but by the time they reacted he had already found a way to shake off the enemy himself. He pulled up his nose ever so slightly and hit the brakes hard, sending the enemy flying right past him, and putting the MiG right in his sights to fire.

It wasn't an unusual trick, Kathryn and Chopper were among the many pilots that had pulled the stunt all the time back at Heierlark.

And then Bartlett often did the exact same thing. If it was what it took to win, they'd seize the opportunity. The only thing unusual about it was the fact that Chopper had waited so long to do it, and the only reasoning Kathryn could find was that he hadn't been confident until he'd run out of other evasive maneuvers to pull. He wasn't ever by the book and he wasn't eager to pick a fight with these guys. It seemed to Kathryn that Alto was right. He really was having an off day.

"Good tone! You've got it, take the shot!" Alto called out as soon as Chopper leveled out, and he quickly did as she said. He fired off a missile, and by the time the enemy MiG realized what was happening it was too late to evade. It struck the engine and just like his three wingmen there was nothing he could do to recover from it. Alto let out a relieved laugh as the plane went down, though Kathryn couldn't see if the pilot got out or not. "Wardog 3 splash one hostile! Jeez you scared the hell out of me…"

Cruise spoke up next, actually sounding as though she was shaken as well. "You need to keep your heads in the game," she told them, almost scolding them. "Don't hesitate any longer than you need to."

"You think too much for too long and you're dead," Bartlett added with a huff, almost sharing in the concern Cruise and Alto shared.

"Yeah, yeah. You all need to relax. I just needed a minute to figure things out, y'know? Get a feel for things. It's fine…we're fine," Chopper said, out of breath. He gave a short laugh that only made him sound more nervous than exasperated, but he was quick to recover and try and keep his cool. "Man, it looks like we really pissed those guys off taking out their drones like we did. They're out a couple several thousand dollars, big deal. It ain't like they lost people…"

Before anyone could respond, Thunderhead's voice sounded once again. It was almost annoying, like he was just yelling at them for the sake of yelling, likely so he wouldn't be dragged into the incident once they returned to base. "You all have no idea the trouble you're putting yourselves in, splashing an enemy squadron like that! Without permission!" he said with a scoff. "What were you thinking, Wardog?!"

"I already told you I'm not gonna watch any more of my pilots die, get that in your head already," Bartlett snapped back, not quite as annoyed as he was when he'd first told Thunderhead off in their last operation but clearly not in the mood for a fight with him at that moment. He got back to business quickly. "Are the skies clear or do we have some more surprises lined up for today?"

Thunderhead hesitated, then gave a frustrated sigh. Much like Dogma, he had the choice of neglecting his duty or allowing those around him to disobey orders. Between the two, he chose the former. "There's another flight of four inbound," he answered, clearing his throat. "Same vector as before."

Bartlett didn't adjust his course right away, choosing to confirm with Cruise before he made a move. "Dagger, what's it look like back there?"

"I've got 'em. Confirmed bandits on radar, same vector as before," Cruise responded without missing a beat as though she'd already verified it ahead of time, predicting Bartlett was going to double check things with her.

"Well, clearly they haven't learned their lesson yet…whew. Alright then, let's go and ask them to join the party," Bartlett said, immediately following up by changing his course, banking and pulling his nose around. "Everyone else, follow my lead."

Nagase was already on his wing, with Kathryn right behind them, leaving Chopper's position open while he caught up. This time Bartlett waited on him before throttling up, which he probably should have done before when they were running from the enemy and not *to* them. Kathryn took a deep breath. "What's the game plan, Captain?"

"Same as before. If they fire on you, shoot back. And chances are they're *gonna* be firing on you, so I better not see any of you hesitating," Bartlett said quickly, not sounding bothered at all by the aspect of a fight. If he was worried then he wasn't about to make that known to them, erasing any doubts anyone could have had that he was capable of taking charge. Not that Kathryn had many doubts about that to begin with. He went on. "If that happens, then we're

gonna shoot them all down, Kid. Just like before."

Chopper gave a short, dry laugh. "Well, at least it's straightforward enough," he said with a deep breath, taking up his position on Bartlett's right wing. "Not like we've got much of a choice, but it's nice when things are simple, y'know?"

"You'd think, but that doesn't make it much better…" Clown said, blowing out a breath of his own. He sounded tired more than anything, but he didn't show any other signs he was having doubts about the whole thing. "But what's one more fight? Let's take care of it."

The two squadrons closed in on one another in the blink of an eye, faster than the squadron of MiGs that had tangled with them before. Unlike the Fishbeds from before, the second squadron was a group of MiG-29As, and compared to the previous squadron they were a lot quicker to react and start their assault. They broke off into pairs and separated as soon as Wardog Squadron was within range, forcing them to do the same. Kathryn broke off with Chopper, splitting their formation and banking to the right to follow the first pair while Nagase followed Bartlett to the right.

Although quicker than the previous squadron and better equipped for a dogfight than the drones they faced, Kathryn didn't find them any more or less difficult than the fighters they'd faced during their last operation. Their flying was uniform and easy to read, even if their tactics differed slightly. Kathryn and Clown had no problem working with Chopper and Alto to take out their targets, making sure they kept the enemy off the other's tail by never giving them an opportunity to try and circle around them. They didn't even give them an opening to do so, keeping close until the enemy fighter tried to break, then one word from any of them and they went wide to cut them off and keep them in a tight circle.

Kathryn was amazed they'd kept it up but they could only keep it up for so long before they had to get serious about taking them down. Their enemy must have realized the same thing as one of them abruptly pulled up and into the clouds before they could respond, and Kathryn immediately followed, without giving Clown or Chopper any warning as to what she was doing. She heard them both curse

out of frustration and surprise but she didn't worry about that, pursuing her enemy higher up. She followed him into the clouds and through them to the other side, both of them leveling out, and by the time she caught up and was within range she'd strayed a bit from Chopper's side.

Patiently, she lined up the shot and waited for the tone and all clear from Clown. She fired one missile, which struck the engine and practically split the aircraft in two. Kathryn broke off before she saw if the pilot ejected while Clown announced the kill. "Wardog 4 has splashed another bandit! Hell yeah!"

"Perfect. Now would you get the hell over here and help us out, Kid?" Chopper called out, apparently not having the same luck she did. He sounded frustrated, maybe even a bit jealous but Kathryn didn't really care to analyze that. She couldn't even think of anything to say to antagonize him.

"We're staying on him but he's slippery. We could use some help keeping him from getting away," Alto called out, sounding far more polite and subtle in her request compared to Chopper's demand.

Bartlett chuckled, he and Nagase in the process of getting ready to move in for the kill. He sounded a bit out of breath when he spoke. "Hey, you two know better than to let them separate you," he told them. "Go and help out Mr. Rock 'n Roll over there before he gets the two of them into trouble."

"Already on it, just hang in there," Kathryn responded, picking Chopper's position out and pulling her nose around before diving. In a matter of seconds she was back on his wing, cutting off his opponent abruptly when he suddenly tried to turn, apparently having been too worried about Chopper being glued to his tail to take notice of where she'd been. Which was the one thing you didn't want to do in a dogfight, however accidental it could be. Kathryn definitely wasn't perfect at keeping her eye on things, and that's why having a backseater wasn't the worst thing in the world.

Caught off guard by Kathryn's entrance and not having the chance to counter when she circled back around to face him head on, she gave Chopper the opening he'd been struggling to get. He probably

would have gotten it eventually on his own, but he seemed lazy today. In his defense none of them were expecting much more resistance than those drones and that ship, but at the same time it was hard to be completely surprised. Chopper switched over to his gun, using that instead of missiles to take out the enemy, succeeding in quickly subduing the MiG by shredding its wing clear off.

"Wardog 3, I've got another confirmed kill," he quickly announced, sounding a bit proud of himself. "How're things going over there? You guys need rescuing yet?"

"You're one to talk," Dogma responded flatly. He didn't give Chopper a chance to respond, speaking to Nagase instead. Chances were if Chopper had made a retort it would have been completely ignored. "Nagase, watch this guy. It looks like he's about to dive to try and shake you."

"I've got it, already noticed," Nagase said, sounding completely focused. While Bartlett had quickly finished off the third MiG, Nagase was still working on downing the target she'd chased after. Luckily, in spite of being dead set in her pursuit she hadn't let the enemy lead her far from the rest of her squadron, but she did follow the Fulcrum as it dove towards the ocean. The two aircraft leveled out, the bellies of their planes just barely above the surface of the water, and Nagase seized the perfect opportunity she had and fired before raising her nose.

Being so low to the ocean it was hard for the MiG's pilot to do anything but go up like Nagase had done, but he didn't react in time and there wasn't much time for him to do so considering how close Nagase had been to him. The plane went down, the pilot ejecting to safety while Nagase leveled out not much farther above.

Cruise was the one that announced the final kill. "And then there were none. Nice work, kids," she praised them, continuing without missing a beat. "Everything looks okay down here, at least as far as our radar says. Thunderhead?"

"Picture clear. All hostile aircraft have been destroyed. That's not to say this day is gonna be over that quickly," Thunderhead

commented with a sigh, still sounding formal in spite of his exasperation with them. He probably gave in, much like before realizing there wasn't anything he could do. If he was annoyed with them he set it aside to continue what was expected of him, allowing very little reluctance to slip into his voice. "Warning is still in effect, though. Keep your heads on a swivel."

It was then that the radar tracking alert went off, warning all of them there was still activity in the area. As it turned out, the ship below was far from being helpless without their fighters and Nagase had flown right into range of their anti-aircraft weaponry. By the time anyone realized where the source was, the ship had already fired and the missile was twisting through the air, heading straight for Nagase. Bartlett quickly called out but not quick enough. "Dammit, watch it Nagase! They're down below us too!"

"Missile on our tail, move it!" Dogma called out frantically, he and Nagase both grunting as the latter tried to pull what evasive maneuvers she could.

As Nagase made a hard, wide turn, the missile stayed close behind her. She began to pull around into a tight loop and she might have almost succeeded in shaking it but it wasn't a risk Bartlett was willing to take. Kathryn and Chopper had moved to assist, but they were too far to get there in time and there wasn't much they could do without engaging the ship below. Their captain was the only one close enough to do anything, throttling up and having moved to Nagase's position in the blink of an eye.

Bartlett twisted around the missile's contrails and shot past it, weaving through the gap Nagase had managed to put between her plane and the missile, and he immediately flew in the opposite direction and made a dive for the sea. The missile's target changed, allowing Nagase to fly to safety while Bartlett was the one left to evade. The entire thing happened in what felt like seconds, Kathryn hardly having time to think let alone process what had happened by the time Bartlett pulled back up into the air. There wasn't much he could do to shake it, the missile closing in fast.

He banked in one direction, he and Cruise both grunting while Cruise sounded panicked for the first time since Kathryn had flown

with her. "Dammit, it's glued to us!" she spat. Doing away with formalities, she slipped up and called out to him by his first name, a clear sign she truly was worried. "Break, Jack, break!"

"Doing the best I can here! Calm down!" Bartlett responded through gritted teeth, following her suggestion and trying to break off in the opposite direction. As he did this he brought his F-4 into a roll for good measure, but the missile struck the tip of the wing in a burst of flame and smoke. He completed the roll, leveling out but flying unsteadily as smoke trailed from the wing, cursing under his breath. "Shit…"

"Captain!" Nagase called out, Kathryn and Chopper having finally closed in on their location and regrouped with their wingman.

Kathryn felt like she was going to puke, having been well aware that things weren't going to be easy that day. She tried to push the thought out of her head, remembering what he'd said about not worrying and trying to reason with her anxiety. He could bail out and everything would be fine. He wasn't dead yet. She took a deep breath, trying not to let her voice give away her nerves while still being aware of the urgency of the situation. Unintentionally, she snapped and blurted out the first thought that came to mind. "Captain! What the hell was *that* stunt?"

"Hey, watch it! I'm still your superior. Now save the waterworks, alright? We're not dead yet," Bartlett huffed in response, and if he was shaken by the incident he still didn't let them know it. His tone softened right away when none of them protested, at least able to tell Kathryn hadn't been snapping out of disrespect. He continued as if nothing was wrong. "We're gonna bail out here. There's no sense in risking a landing, not with the state of this plane. Besides, these things can always be replaced. It's gettin' the crew back alive that counts, right?"

"Hey, y'all aren't injured are you?" Clown asked quickly, some hesitancy in his voice.

"No. We're fine," Cruise responded, sounding a bit shaken up but otherwise fine. She was quick to collect herself. "We've been through worse than this, but…still. More excitement than I was

expecting."

"Ah, you're just a baby," Bartlett teased to ease the tension, but it was more fond and tired than his usual playful teasing. He still kept things together, issuing his last orders quickly. "Make a call to scramble the search and rescue copter and get my spare plane ready, okay? We'll see you all back at the base."

The pit in Kathryn's stomach worsened. She didn't feel alright about this, but there wasn't anything she could do to stop it. So she just had to suck it up. "Yes, sir," she replied reluctantly, unable to think of anything else to say. "Just…be careful."

"Quit worrying so much, Kid," Bartlett said with a breathy laugh. "How many times am I gonna have to tell you that, huh? Hey, and it goes for the rest of you nuggets too!"

The other five all sounded off right before Bartlett and Cruise punched out, the plane crashing into the water as they were both jettisoned when the canopy blew. Two parachutes appeared in the air, drifting slowly and safely to the water below while the request for the rescue was sent in. The only thing Kathryn and the others could do was hold their position and formation nearby, out of range of the enemy ship's anti-air defenses but still roughly above where Bartlett and Cruise went down.

Barely five minutes went by before Thunderhead's voice sounded in their ears, raising his voice and speaking a lot faster than usual, which set them even more on edge. It was a sudden but simple order. "Warning! Wardog Squadron, return to base immediately!"

"But…the rescue helicopter isn't here yet," Alto pointed out hesitantly.

"What's going on?" Dogma asked, also sounding a bit more concerned than he might have under better circumstances. Although he didn't often question orders, this was one of the first times he did and Kathryn had a feeling it wouldn't be the last. "Captain Bartlett and Lieutenant Cruise are still out here."

"Forget about it and leave that to the rescue team! We need you to

refuel and rearm at the base, we don't have time to waste waiting around!" Thunderhead barked in response, although there was the slightest shift in his tone at the start that indicated he himself was at least somewhat worried. Even so, he wasn't giving them the choice to argue. "We need you back in the air ASAP. Yuktobania has declared war on us! We're now at war with Yuktobania!"

And just like that, everything went to hell.

1140hrs.

Genette returned, escorted by an MP, to the quarters he was assigned to after being unexpectedly asked to report to Colonel Perrault. In an unexpected turn of events, Genette had his confiscated belongings returned to him that morning but the base commander made it quite clear he was to proceed with caution moving forward. Apparently the man was worried word would get out that they'd roughed up a civilian, though frankly Genette hadn't taken their actions personally. Even so, he couldn't help but let himself feel a bit hopeful.

Unfortunately for him, though, the restrictions on his stay became harsher and saw him confined to his quarters like a prisoner. He may have gotten his equipment back but he wasn't yet given clearance to actually do much with it. The least he could do however was offer some insight into the day to day life on base as he was experiencing it, the one thing he was actually given permission to do. He made a mental note to check with his roommate – Chopper – just to get that out of the way.

As Genette stepped inside his quarters he was greeted by Kirk, the black labrador that Chopper owned, looking curious and happy that someone had come back as if he thought they were there just to see him. The dog was well behaved and mellow, which wasn't what Genette had been expecting but he'd gratefully take that over the especially rambunctious dogs he was used to, and he had no problem giving Kirk a pat on the head as he stepped inside. After realizing that Genette was alone and Chopper had yet to return, Kirk quickly lost interest in him, returning to where he'd been laying by

the door.

It was just as well. Genette wanted to get his stuff unpacked and set up as soon as he could, lest he forget to do it later on. Or worse, had it confiscated out of nowhere again. He set his camera bag down before proceeding to unpack everything, quickly making sure that none of it had been damaged when base security had taken it into their possession. Once he'd established everything was in one piece, he took to setting up one of the cameras up in a corner of the room on the wardrobe by the door to overlook the rest of the room. He set it to record as soon as he had it situated, pausing only a moment to make sure it was stable before he backed away to show off the room he was in for the sake of reference.

The crew quarters were nothing special, all containing the same barebones furniture to make the space livable long term with limited decorations put up by its occupants. At least as far as Genette could understand. The room that primarily was Chopper's as well as his for the time being was no exception. A small space with bare, offwhite walls and dull, grayish-blue carpet that was rough and hard enough that they could have gotten away with using linoleum and no one would have noticed the difference. There was a large window dead center in the room to provide natural lighting, but as Genette and Chopper had both left early the blinds were still drawn. That and the overcast weather gave it a rather depressing feel.

On one side of the window, off to a corner of the room was a metal frame bunk bed and across from that in the other corner was a small, rather uncomfortable couch. Positioned between them was a nightstand with a phone sitting on it. The rest of the furniture was of the same matching set, like you'd expect to find in a corporate setting. The table beside the couch was messy, housing a lamp and a haphazard row of books propped against each other, along with a few framed photographs belonging to Chopper. Underneath the table were several stacks of old records and magazines, and beside that table was a cabinet that stored additional records and CDs within it. Atop sat a spare flight helmet, a fan, and a stereo.

Across the room was a desk with various stacks of paper strewn across it with a desktop computer sitting in the center, a half-filled water bottle sitting forgotten on a corner. Other than Genette's

camera bag and those papers, there wasn't anything special about it. The walls were what really added life to the place, containing various flashy posters of different musical artists that had been carefully taped to the walls. Were it not for the posters and photographs to spruce up the environment, Genette would have gone so far as to compare the room to a prison cell.

His musing and 'tour' of the room to the camera was cut off by a knock at the door, prompting Kirk to lift his head with a curious whine. Genette wasn't in the position to refuse visitors, mainly because he'd been made to feel as if his mere presence on the base was an imposition, so he called out to the person waiting on the other side of the door. "Come in."

A second later the door opened and he was greeted by Captain Hamilton who gave him a small smile in greeting as he stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. He lingered by the door, standing with his hands behind his back and a rigid posture, keeping up formalities. "I'm not interrupting your work am I?"

"Oh. No, not at all," Genette said, giving him a small chuckle. He nodded towards the wardrobe where the camera was, which Hamilton glanced to. "I'm still trying to set things up, collect what I can, y'know? I assume you heard the news."

"That's right, I did. In fact, I actually stopped by just to ensure that your equipment had been returned to you," Hamilton said with a short nod, taking a look around the room. First he looked to the desk where Genette's camera bag sat, then around the rest of the room, taking in the decor with a blank expression. He took a deep breath. "The Base Commander can be difficult, but there's a point when I'm unwilling to tolerate his actions, however justifiable they may be. However, if I'm going to bend the rules, I prefer to do so with subtlety."

Genette blinked, not having a difficult time putting the pieces together. Perrault hadn't suddenly become somewhat reasonable on his own accord, which Genette should have realized sooner after how odd the exchange had been. He decided to hazard a guess. "Did you speak with him about this?"

Hamilton suddenly seemed almost sheepish, giving him a short laugh. He was tense, even when smiling. "Guilty as charged," he replied, the smile fading a bit to a blank expression. "I'm guessing he chose not to make any mention of that when you spoke to him."

"Not a word. He had a whole gruff speech about how he 'took pity' on me, but honestly I was just grateful he wasn't reaming me out," Genette said, feeling a bit guilty he hadn't figured it out sooner. Between the two of them, Hamilton had been far more welcoming than he'd have expected based on his resting blank expression and serious demeanor. But this was an almost friendly gesture. "I suppose I should be thanking you then. I'm not used to having many people sticking up for me in my line of work."

"Don't worry about it, I wasn't expecting credit or anything. I was just trying to give you a hand. Figured it was the least we could do for you after what you had to go through the other day," Hamilton said, being one of the few people other than Bartlett and the other pilots that was willing to acknowledge the incident. He almost looked sympathetic as he continued. "You're lucky to have a job like that and to be so passionate about it, too. Not many would go to the lengths you have. I'd hate to see all of that go to waste."

"It wouldn't be the first time an assignment crashed and burned… er…I probably could have chosen a better choice of words," Genette said nervously, suddenly realizing what he said was a bit insensitive. Though it wasn't a lie. He'd had plenty of stories he chased down only to have them run straight into the ground, so it wasn't anything new to him. He cracked a small smile of his own. "The point is, I appreciate the effort you went through to get my camera back. You didn't have to. I know that I'm stuck here, but is there a way I can repay you?"

"Just consider it a friendly gesture, no strings attached," Hamilton said, appearing genuine as he spoke, the slightest hint of his smile from earlier still on his face. It was hard to tell exactly what he was thinking but Genette figured he'd learn to read him eventually, assuming he was stuck here long enough. Hamilton went on. "Just don't make me regret it. Between you and me, I'd have liked to have a job like yours if I'd had the chance."

The comment piqued Genette's curiosity. Hamilton seemed like a very guarded person compared to the others he'd spoken with, so he didn't want to pry too much but he couldn't help but ask him about it. It was difficult enough to find people that shared his interests, he might as well make the most of it. "Really? What stopped you?"

"Military family on my father's side, mainly my uncle's influence. Hell of a guy. He practically helped raise myself and my sister," Hamilton responded, almost without missing a beat. It seemed like something he was actually a bit proud of, willing to bring it up with just a second to consider his words. He shrugged. "It didn't leave much of a question as to what I wanted to do. Had he not been a soldier I think my life might have turned out differently. Not that either path is necessarily worse than the other, just the way things go."

Genette nodded slowly, debating whether or not he should ask his next question. It was something he'd been wondering for a while now, though he was more or less sure he knew the answer. "And what about your sister? Is she a soldier, too."

Hamilton's expression faltered, the small smile immediately fading into nothing. He seemed suddenly hesitant, but after taking a deep breath he was willing to answer as though he hadn't frozen up for a moment. "She is. And a pilot at that. She can be a real handful, but she's got promise…just needs to grow up a little."

"Am I correct in assuming that *Lieutenant* Hamilton is related to you, then?" Genette asked. He figured an easier way to distinguish the two of them would be to refer to her by her TAC name but he wasn't sure yet how he felt about that.

The captain hesitated once again, clearing his throat. "That's right, she's my sister."

"Ah. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to turn this into an interview," Genette said, suddenly feeling apologetic as the tone of their conversation changed. He hadn't expected it to be a touchy subject, but he could see why it might not be something he wanted the entire world to know, lest the base ever accuse their superiors of nepotism. "Forget I ever asked, I didn't mean to pry."

"Relax. It's not exactly a secret, I just wasn't expecting the question," Hamilton replied, bouncing back rather quickly. Genette got the feeling it wasn't quite that simple but he didn't want to push any further, and luckily for him there was no need to fill the awkward silence that set in as the phone on the nightstand suddenly let out a low, trilling sound as it rang out. Genette almost jumped, but Hamilton simply glanced at the phone and crossed the room in a few quick strides. He hesitated only a moment out of courtesy. "You don't mind, do you? Things have been busy this morning, so I told them where they could find me if anything came up."

"Oh, no, I don't mind at all. Be my guest," Genette said, stepping aside and gesturing to the phone. Hamilton gave him a grateful nod and quickly answered the phone, Genette backing away and taking a seat on the bed as he quietly watched the captain as he spoke to whoever had called.

A few minutes went by, Hamilton's conversation appearing to be largely one-sided and anything that the other participant might be saying was drowned out by the sound of jet engines outside, so Genette had no idea what was going on. He had a hunch, based on Hamilton's expression throughout the call. His free hand clenched at his side and he kept his head steady, only briefly glancing up and staring at the closed blinds. Eventually, he lowered his gaze and his expression turned to a harsh frown as he bid farewell to whoever was on the other end. "Right. I see. Understood."

He set the receiver back down with a gentle *click-clunk* sound. Genette watched quietly, unsure if he should say anything and not sure what he would say if he did. Hamilton kept his gaze down, tapping his fingertip on the receiver at a steady pace as if to collect himself. One, two, three. He paused, then tapped once more with more force than before, the light clacking that his nail had made on the plastic more audible than the first three times. He didn't say anything right away, still looking down at the phone with an unreadable expression.

Although he was sure his curiosity wasn't appreciated, the sudden tension was worrying him. "Is everything alright?"

Hamilton turned to face him, the faint smile he always put on

appearing in an instant as if in an attempt to set him at ease. "Well… it appears that we no longer have any reason to hold you anymore."

"What do you mean?" Genette asked, getting to his feet, Hamilton watching him as he stood up. Although he could already guess what had happened after all that happened since he arrived, he didn't want to jump to conclusions. He was sure his concern was evident in his voice. "Did something happen?"

"Yuktobania has just declared war on us, not that this comes as a surprise, I'm sure," Hamilton said, his expression fading to match the grim news they were both receiving. They both knew he was referring to the incident that took place a few days before and every operation that had followed. He turned away, adjusting his cap as he set off towards the door at a quick pace. He kept his voice cool and steady in spite of the seriousness of the situation. "Apologies, but I have to go. The news is going to spread like wildfire. Not only have they confirmed the military's suspicions, but they chose to launch an offensive simultaneously, too. Our naval port at St. Hewlett is getting bombed right now."

Genette watched as he abruptly left, trying to process everything that he'd just been told. He recalled his conversation with Bartlett and Cruise about Yuktobania just three days prior, about how they'd been making a logical conclusion based on the evidence they had, and yet it was still a strange thing to learn. He snapped out of his shock in a matter of seconds, coming back to the present as soon as the door to the quarters was quickly shut behind Hamilton as he left, and his attention was drawn to the window as he recalled the aircraft he'd heard earlier.

He took a few steps forward, leaning over the nightstand and parting a gap in the blinds to see outside. Wardog Squadron had taken off earlier that day, and he'd heard them return not long ago, but he'd heard nothing about their operation. The window gave him an almost perfect view of the runway in the distance, between the palm trees as several humvees and other vehicles were moved about while soldiers ran past. The engines he'd heard from before grew from a whine to a steady roar as the squadron took to the skies once again, presumably taking off to the mainland to protect St. Hewlett, and Genette counted them as they lifted into the air one by one.

There were only three of them.

Author's Note: *After well over a month the second mission is finally done!*

A couple of reasons this one took a hot minute to write...one, the first two missions are very slow and not my favorites in the game. The real excitement kicks off with Narrow Margin imo, so it was a challenge to try and make this one interesting. I'm still unsure how to feel about it. Second, I've been busy with Three Strikes *and it remains my priority. Three...time just goes by really fast and there's only so much of it RIP.*

Anyways! Not much to say and not a whole lot of expansion has been able to really happen yet. Missions 2-4 happen on the exact same day and there isn't a lot of time in between them, but after the next chapter I have some in-between scenes to expand on the hours between Narrow Margin and First Flight and I'm super excited to write them. There's a lot going on in the background and I can't wait to cover it.

As always, hope y'all enjoyed!